

MURDER, M.D.

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CHAPTER ONE

"No, SIR MARK, I give it up!" Dr Kurt Wiegler exclaimed, flinging out his hands in a gesture of utter despair. "I have lived in England thirty years, ever since my mother, who was English herself, brought me over here as a boy before the last war. I am a naturalised British subject and I finished my education here. But understand the English mind! no, I never shall."

It was after lunch on Sunday, November 7th. The two men were sitting in the library of Sir Mark Corringham's place, Exton House, where the tradition of Sunday luncheon parties was still carried on, even in war-time. It was difficult to find guests in Exton Forcett, for of the few residents there were in the village, so many had left to serve in various capacities elsewhere. And those who had drifted in, seeking a safe area in which to live, were not at all the sort of people Lady Corringham cared to invite. The Hon. Mrs Burwash, for instance. She might be all right socially, but it gave one the creeps to see those black, birdlike eyes, peering out of her parchment-coloured face.

There were always the rector and his wife, of course, Canon and Mrs Laverock. But they were rather heavy fare for too frequent digestion. The rector was an earnest student of the early Fathers of the Church, and was given to recounting long anecdotes about some forgotten ascetic or martyr, in the manner of the medieval Lives of the Saints. Mrs Laverock was certainly a great talker, but as she invariably veered to the doings of the local Women's Institute, her conversation was apt to be monotonous.

This Sunday it had been the turn of Hermione Cecil and Dr Wiegler. Mrs Cecil was the wife of Dr St John Cecil, who had been the popular though possibly rather incompetent doctor of the village since he had inherited his father's practice twenty years before. But at the outbreak of the war, he had sought a commission in the Royal Army Medical Corps, and was now serving in the Middle East. Dr. Wiegler had come to Exton Forcett as locum, and lived at Foursquare, the Cecils' rather beautiful old house at the other end of the village, half a mile or so from Exton House.

There had been a brace of pheasants, shot by Sir Mark himself, and an apple charlotte, for which Lady Corringham's

cook was famous. And now, as was the custom of the house, the party had split up, the ladies retiring to the drawing-room and the gentlemen to the library. Here Sir Mark and his guest sat, a cup of coffee beside each, before a smouldering log fire, for the day was distinctly chilly.

Corringham laughed at the doctor's confession of failure. He was a man of sixty-five, tall, spare and upright, with white hair and keen humorous eyes. He was more active and alert than many a much younger man, and it was a great grief to him that on reaching the age of retirement he had been obliged to give up the command of the local Home Guard. The Corringhams had owned Exton House for generations, and the reigning Corringham had always been looked upon as the squire of the village. The general consensus of opinion in the taproom of the White Bull was that, though the present squire and his wife were thorough gentlepeople, there was no swank about them.

Dr Wiegler was a man of entirely different type. His Austrian origin had left very little mark upon him, except perhaps an over-eager tendency towards psychology. He was never content to accept a fact or even a symptom without inquiring into the thought processes which underlay it. He was an extremely skilful doctor, with an unfortunate knack of antagonising his patients. He was short and inclined to stoutness, but this did not interfere with his restless and occasionally tactless energy. Although only forty-eight, his massive head was nearly bald. His features were coarse and prominent, and his whole expression was one of determination and ability. He gave the impression of being a man whom it would be difficult to deceive.

"Understand us?" said Corringham lazily. "It's not easy, I know. I don't suppose we understand ourselves. Possibly because most of us don't waste time trying to. But what exactly have you come up against now?"

"Stupidity," Wiegler replied. "Many years have I lived in London before I came here to look after this little parish for a time. I flattered myself that I was on the fringe of learning something about the mentality of the Londoners. Stupid some of them are, yes. But there is always some reason behind their stupidity. They haven't been taught, or they don't understand. The disease will respond to treatment, it can be cured. But here in this village the disease of stupidity is incurable. Shall I tell you why? Because the patient doesn't want to be cured. He'd rather remain stupid than risk the mental discomfort of intelligence."

"I wouldn't say that every one in the village here is stupid," said Corringham mildly. "Most of them are pretty good at their jobs, humble though they may be. The majority are craftsmen, not botchers. You'll agree to that, surely?"

"Certainly I agree," Wiegler replied. "That's got nothing to do with it. A man may have a certain amount of mechanical skill, and yet be utterly stupid, lacking the power or the inclination to reason for himself. Take Sambourne, for instance. You know him?"

"Which Sambourne? Fred, the one who fell off a ladder the other day and broke his leg?"

Wiegler nodded. "That's the man. Only he didn't fall off a ladder, he fell through it. This is what happened. Sambourne works for Plowman, as you probably know. Well, Mrs. Burwash went to Plowman and complained that the repairs he'd done to her roof weren't satisfactory. The rain came in or something. She made such a nuisance of herself that Plowman sent Sambourne round to Quenbies to see what was the matter and gave him a ladder to take with him. And that ladder was rotten, as Plowman ought to have known. Sambourne got half-way up it, when two of the rungs broke under him. He fell through the ladder and was picked up with a compound fracture of the right leg."

Corringham frowned. It had seemed lately that Plowman, the local builder, was always in trouble of some kind, due to his own fault. "I hadn't heard that," he said. "But I don't see where stupidity comes in, only negligence on Plowman's part."

"Negligence is very often a symptom of stupidity," Wiegler replied. "But that isn't what I meant. I got Sambourne fixed up, and he'll be all right if he doesn't do anything foolish. And when I went to see him this morning, I told him what he might do about it. I said he should bring an action for damages against Plowman. But the silly fellow didn't seem to understand what I meant. I tried to explain, but all I could get out of him was that he didn't see his way to doing a thing like that. He'd rub along all right on his insurance and his club money till he could go to work again. And he didn't seem to take my good advice at all kindly. If that isn't stupidity, I don't know what is."

"I dare say he knows what he's about," said Corringham soothingly. "But it was infernally careless of Plowman to send a man out with a rotten ladder. He'll have to do something about it. I should have thought he'd have learned his

lesson, with Bert Hawthorne and his wheel-chair always before his eyes."

"Yes, I've heard that story, too, though the accident happened before I came here. Hawthorne was tiling a roof when it collapsed under him, because the rafters Plowman had put in weren't strong enough to stand the weight. Result, Hawthorne loses the use of both his legs for life. Well, that's no business of mine. But Sambourne is my business, for he's my patient. And I told Plowman what I thought about it."

"Did you?" Corringham asked. "And how did he take it?"

"None too well. He didn't seem to realise that the accident was his responsibility. We had rather a heated argument about it. This was yesterday, when I met him as I was going through the village, just outside Mrs Burwash's place. I stopped him and told him he ought to be ashamed of himself for risking a man's life like that. And he had the insolence to say that if people didn't hurt themselves now and then the doctors would very soon have to put up their shutters. As I say, we were talking rather heatedly when Mrs Burwash came out and joined in. But she didn't seem to care about Sambourne or whose fault it was. Her concern was that her roof hadn't been seen to yet. It must be done at once or she'd know the reason why."

"Mrs Burwash is a determined woman," said Corringham, with a faint smile. "But I'm very sorry you went out of your way to quarrel with Plowman. He's got his faults, I know, but in spite of them he's an influential man in the village. If you'll forgive my saying so, Doctor, he might do your practice quite a lot of harm."

Wiegler laughed scornfully. "Let him," he exclaimed. "It's Cecil's practice, not mine. I hope you don't think I'm dependent on the fees I draw as his locum. A good many years as a consultant in London have enabled me to put by a very comfortable nest-egg. I had meant to retire and devote myself to ornithology, which is my hobby. I shouldn't have come to a place like this if I hadn't heard that the Brooks was a perfect place for a birdwatcher. And now I am here I shall stop, in spite of that ass Plowman, or in spite of anybody else, for that matter."

"You'll please yourself, I suppose," said Corringham a trifle coldly. "It's the avian population of Exton Forcett rather than the human that interests you, one gathers."

"I'm not in the least interested in the human population."

except as a study in stupidity," Wiegler replied, shrugging his shoulders "I live surrounded by it, and if it were not for the relief provided by the birds, I should be suffocated by it" I won't say anything about the establishment at Foursquare, for I know the Cecils are old friends of yours But if you had to study St. John Cecil's case-book, as I have, you'd be appalled."

"Cecil knows how to mind his own business, at all events," said Corringham, stung to exasperation by Wiegler's words and the contemptuous tone in which they were spoken

"Meaning that I'm a busybody? Well, I ask you, isn't it my business, isn't it everybody's business, to try to drive some sense into these people? I'll give you another example; Foxcroft the policeman. He rides about the place on his bicycle, with the sort of expression that I've noticed in mules. And he's every bit as obstinate, too I ran into him yesterday, not long after I'd seen Plowman And I asked him if it wasn't usual for the police to take action in cases of criminal negligence?"

"You were still thinking of Sambourne's accident?" Corringham asked

"Of course I was I told Foxcroft that he ought to prosecute Plowman for sending a chap out with a ladder that wasn't safe And he said that he couldn't do anything until a formal complaint were made to him Complaint! Wasn't I complaining? But he only shook his head I could almost hear his rudimentary brain-cells rattling in it like peas in a drum He said he'd speak to the sergeant about it, and that's as far as the matter will go"

"You must realise that in these village communities there's got to be a certain amount of give and take," said Corringham "You'll set the whole place by the ears, if you're not careful"

"What if I do? They might start trying to think then Somebody's got to put a stop to this sort of thing Plowman's a menace to the community Have you heard what the council are going to do about that affair of the air-raid shelter?"

"They're going to make Plowman put it right, I believe," Corringham replied

"And leave it at that? Well, Sir Mark, all I can say is that it's a perfect scandal If somebody else doesn't make it their business to show Plowman up, I shall And I shall tell him so, next time I meet him"

Wiegler finished his coffee and stood up "I have to thank

you for a most excellent lunch," he said. "Now I must get back before I go out again to see how Sambourne and one or two of my other patients are getting on."

Corringham made no effort to detain him, and the two went together to the drawing-room, where Lady Corringham and Hermione Cecil were engaged in earnest conversation. Lady Corringham was a handsome, silver-haired woman, a few years younger than her husband, with a hint of his good-humoured outlook in her grey eyes and at the corners of her mouth. Hermione, smaller and obviously on the wrong side of forty, had rather the appearance of a faded Madonna. With her oval face and heavy dark hair she must once have been on the verge of beauty, in a somewhat exotic fashion. But she had let herself go, and now looked what she was, a worried and not over-intelligent, middle-aged woman.

As the two men entered the room, the conversation ceased abruptly and there was a perceptible pause before Corringham spoke. "Dr Wiegler says he must be going. Are you going to walk back with him, Hermione?"

Hermione Cecil avoided the eyes of the two men standing before her. "I'd rather stay here for a little and talk to Sylvia," she replied, staring out of the window. She seemed to have something in common with the tall trees surrounding the lawn, their branches dripping with the moisture of a November afternoon. "I'd rather stay here if you aren't sick to death of my company, Sylvia. I've heaps of things I want to talk to you about."

"Of course, my dear," Lady Corringham said. "I'd love you to stay and talk to me. Good-bye, Dr Wiegler. I do hope you'll come and lunch with us some other Sunday soon."

Dr Wiegler took his leave and Corringham returned to the library, where he began to read his favourite Sunday newspaper. But neither the cautiously-worded forecasts nor the melancholy jeremiads of the journalists could keep him awake. He dozed off, to awake with a start when the door opened and his wife entered the room.

"Hallo, my dear," he exclaimed, as he picked a log from the basket and threw it on the fire. "Has Hermione gone home, then?"

For several seconds Lady Corringham watched the sparks as they streamed up the chimney from the kindling log. Then with an easy grace of movement she sat down in the chair opposite her husband's. "Yes, she's gone. She waited till she knew he'd have left on his afternoon rounds. Mark,

there'll be a tragedy in that house if something isn't done about it."

"Now, that's what I call really lucid," said Corringham. "I wonder why it is that people should select this particular Sunday afternoon to insist that something should be done about something. What's Hermione been saying to you?"

Lady Corringham smiled. "It's no use, Mark. We've been married too long for you to get away with it like that. You know perfectly well that things can't go on as they are."

"Be consoled by the reflection that they never do, my dear. Now, let's get this clear. Are you trying to tell me that Hermione and Wiegler have fallen out?"

"Good heavens, no. It might be far better if they had. They are on terms of the most frigid and exact politeness. And Hermione tells me that if she has to put up much longer with the Wiegler man—that's what she calls him—she'll go crazy."

"He'd be the first to detect the preliminary symptoms," said Corringham quietly. "And he'd probably insist upon carrying out some psychological treatment of his own. What's the matter with Hermione? Apart from a certain assertiveness, shall we say, Wiegler's all right. She might have had to put up with a much worse type of lodger."

"The instinct of the male protecting his kind against the predatory and vicious female," Lady Corringham replied. "I know perfectly well that you don't like the man. I could tell that when you came into the drawing-room together just now. So what's the good of pretending? Would you like to have to live with the Wiegler man?"

"Hermione isn't called upon to live with him. At least I hope she isn't. St. John wouldn't like that at all."

"Don't be exasperating. You know perfectly well what I mean. Would you reside in the same house as the Wiegler man? Of course not. You wouldn't put up with him for a week. But Hermione's got to. He's her lodger, as you put it, but he's a privileged lodger and she can't get rid of him."

"Why should she want to get rid of him? It's always struck me that St. John was devilish lucky to get so capable a man to come to a place like this."

"He may be capable, but if half of what Hermione says is true he's quite impossible. He's always interfering with things that don't concern him in the least. He's openly scornful of St. John's professional ability. The other day he told her, in front of Eileen Draper, the secretary dispenser, that he

wondered more of St. John's patients hadn't died of neglect. As you know perfectly well, he's driven nearly all St. John's old private patients to either Dr Woodcock or Dr Blesborough at Marbeach, and Hermione doesn't think they'll ever come back again. And she suspects that he's making love to Eileen Draper."

"Here, hold on!" Corringham exclaimed "That's a truly feminine reason for dislike. Why shouldn't the man make love to the poor girl? Does Hermione want him to make love to her instead? I've always been sorry for that Draper girl. Her life among her ledgers and her pill-boxes must be far from romantic. Being made love to by Wiegler might inspire her young life with all the fragrance of the pharmacopœia. She would sense myrrh in the ammoniated quinine and frankincense in the nux vomica. Perhaps those illegible scrawls he writes, which we take to be prescriptions, are really love-letters to his dispenser, couched in some cabalistic tongue which none but they can read. It's all very thrilling. Why didn't you ask the girl to lunch here to-day with the other two?"

"I did, but Hermione said she couldn't come. Someone has to stay in Foursquare to answer the telephone. And do stop talking nonsense. Hermione particularly wants me to ask your advice upon all this."

Corringham's eyes twinkled. "My advice to her would be to take life calmly and not worry about Wiegler. All the things she complains about are petty annoyances. Wiegler doesn't steal the silver or get drunk and throw the furniture at her head. But we've known Hermione long enough to be quite certain that she wouldn't take that advice. Her gnats have always been scorpions."

"Yes, I know," his wife agreed. "Hermione does exaggerate her troubles. But this man Wiegler has got on her nerves to such an extent that I'm really afraid she'll do something desperate. The last straw is that he's found out somehow that St. John backed Plowman when he built those bungalows on the Marbeach road."

"Damn!" Corringham exclaimed violently. "Sorry, my dear, one shouldn't swear on Sunday, I know. But I've been so pestered with Plowman's shortcomings that I'm sick of the sound of his name. I can't see that it matters if Wiegler has found out that St. John backed him."

"He's been going on at Hermione about it. He says that it was unprofessional conduct on St. John's part, and that it

ought to be reported to the General Medical Council or something. Is it?"

"I haven't the remotest idea, but I dare say it is. As I told St. John at the time, any one who encourages builders to put up bungalows ought to be subject to a penalty. They ought to be compelled to live opposite them for the rest of their lives. If I were Hermione, I shouldn't worry about it. Wiegler is constitutionally incapable of keeping his nose out of trouble and other people's affairs, and that's all there is about it."

"Can't you drop him a hint? He'd probably listen to you."

"Thereby taking a leaf out of his own book? I don't mind admitting that I did drop hints as heavy as cannon balls when he was in here after lunch. But it was no good. He seems to consider that his duties here involve social reform as well as medicine. He's got his knife into Plowman now, and I'm very much afraid that he's going to make a lot of trouble over that wretched air-raid shelter business."

"I've heard a lot about that, but I don't for a moment suppose it's been the true story."

"Then I'll tell it you, as briefly as I can. The Rural District Council, in their wisdom, decided that Exton Forcett ought to have a shelter. I can say that I, as the representative of the village on the council, showed no great enthusiasm for the scheme, but it was passed all the same. A site was chosen, the surveyor got out a specification, estimates were called for, and Plowman got the job. You've seen the thing for yourself often enough. It forms an imposing monument at the corner of the village street."

"It's perfectly hideous," Lady Corringham remarked tersely.

"It bears a not-remote resemblance to a public lavatory, I'll admit. But Wiegler isn't grumbling at its appearance. As soon as it was finished Wiegler appointed himself as a committee of inspection. He went so far as to knock a brick out of one of the walls with a crowbar. And he found that instead of the wall being eighteen inches of solid brickwork as the specification laid down, Plowman had put up two skins of single brick and filled in between them with rubbish. He came straight to me, and dragged me away to see it."

"He was in a great state of excitement. Said that Plowman was a wholesale murderer, for if a bomb fell anywhere near the shelter the folk inside it would be slaughtered like sheep. And

when he'd finished raving he wanted to know what I proposed to do about it. I told him that I would bring the matter to the notice of the council, and that quieted him down, at least for the time being.

"I didn't, of course, bring the matter up at a council meeting. I asked the surveyor, who is a very good fellow, to come over and when he'd seen the place I had a chat with him. He was all hot and bothered about it, as you might suppose. You see, he ought to have kept his eye on the job and watched what Plowman was up to. But it was war-time, his staff had all been called up, and he was left single-handed. He'd had a thousand more important things to attend to, and in short he had left Plowman to his own devices.

"There was no point in kicking up a fuss and getting the surveyor into trouble. I told him that he'd better see Plowman and talk to him pretty straight. If he would make good the deficiencies to the surveyor's satisfaction, nothing further need be said about it. And that, I understand, is what's going to happen. But I'm afraid it won't satisfy Wiegler. He's out after Plowman's blood. And I fancy nothing else will appease him."

"Isn't there any way of getting him out of the place?" Lady Corringham asked. "The man is a perfect nuisance, upsetting Hermione and now wanting to make trouble like that. You know what they're saying about him in the village, I suppose? They call him Nosey Parker and the rumour is going round now that he's a spy. Alice Laverock asked me about it the other day. She'd heard it whispered at the Women's Institute."

"Naturally," said Corringham equably. "To the insular Briton every person of foreign origin is obviously a spy. Why else should he be here? And you don't want me to remind you that the whispers of the Women's Institute are even less reliable than newspaper forecasts, if such a thing be possible. What useful information could be conveyed to the enemy by a spy living in a place like this, do you suppose?"

"There's that searchlight post between here and Marbeach," Lady Corringham replied darkly. "And Wiegler is always going about with a pair of binoculars slung over his shoulder. I've seen him watching things through them myself."

"My dear girl, do pull yourself together," her husband exclaimed. "Your conversation with Hermione seems to have completely demoralised you. Do you suppose that a single searchlight-post would afford constant occupation for

even an apprentice spy? Wiegler never as much as goes outside the parish, he's too busy stirring up strife within our boundaries. I don't know much about spies, but I imagine they don't watch whatever it is they do watch under the eyes of the admiring multitude. The man's hobby is ornithology. He likes watching birds and their engaging habits, that's all."

"That may be, but Hermione is very worried about it. She's expecting Roland home very soon now on leave, and she's going to talk to him about it."

Corringham groaned

"Confound the woman!" he exclaimed "Has she been going round telling the world that her brilliant and handsome son has been appointed to Intelligence?"

"Certainly not. Nobody but you and I know I'm certain of that."

"I wonder," said Corringham doubtfully. "Motherly pride is a very dangerous thing, especially when it is planted in the breast of a woman like Hermione. Don't you remember how she used to drive us all to distraction whenever Roland won a prize for anything at school? She'd be so thrilled by Intelligence or the Secret Service, as she would call it, that she couldn't resist spreading the news 'Of course it's terribly secret, and you must swear not to breathe a word,' I can hear her saying it. She'll queer Roland's pitch for him, if she's not careful."

"Aren't you being the least bit unkind about Hermione?" Lady Corringham asked. "You've always liked her, ever since she married St. John, or you've always said you did."

"I like her well enough, and I don't mean to be uncharitable. But I do resent having my Sunday afternoon disturbed by her differences of opinion with Wiegler, who, entirely between ourselves, my dear, I don't like. Let's have tea in here, it's cosier than the drawing-room."

CHAPTER TWO

FOURSQUARE, where the Cecils had lived now for two generations, was a very pleasant place. The house stood in its own grounds, lawn, flower and fruit gardens, the latter with espalier fruit trees of forgotten age, a paddock, and an acre or so of woodland. The whole was enclosed within a high brick wall, in which were only two gaps. These were a gateway from

which a curving drive led to the main entrance at the front of the house, and a second gateway, rather similar, which opened into a fair-sized yard at the back of the house. On one side of the yard was the coachhouse and stabling, the former now used as a garage, the latter for the storing of odds and ends. From this yard two doorways led into the house. One of these was the back door proper. The other gave access to a wing added on to the house, which had originally been square in design as well as in name, containing the surgery, dispensary and so forth. Patients coming to the house used the yard gateway and the door leading into the annexe, known as the surgery door.

The grounds, which covered in all about six acres, were roughly triangular in shape. On the side containing the entrance gates, and bounding the lawn and part of the wood, ran the main road. On the second side there was no gap in the wall, which here bounded part of the wood and the paddock. Along this side ran a lane, which after an irregular course, petered out at a farmhouse. The third side which was the shortest of the three, bounded the paddock and the kitchen garden. Here, for a considerable part of its length, the wall was double. In addition to the outer wall, in which there was no gap, there was a second inner wall, forming part of the boundary of the kitchen garden. Against this wall on the garden side were fruit trees, a vinery and a row of frames. A space eight feet wide separated the two walls, both of them ten feet high.

It was possible that the inner wall had been built as an additional security against pilferers, for beyond this side of the triangle lay one of the arms of the straggling village. This consisted of a group of three or four cottages, set at haphazard round what was known as the Green, but was actually a piece of wasteland thickly overgrown with docks and nettles. One of these cottages, known as Medlar Cottage from the fact that a rather stunted medlar-tree overshadowed its front garden, stood so close to the wall that its ramshackle outbuildings actually abutted upon it. In this cottage lived Sarah Hawthorne, a spinster of forty, gaunt, muscular and hard-working, and her crippled brother Albert, universally known as Bert, five years her senior. Since the war the establishment at Medlar Cottage had been increased by the addition of a small boy, now aged eleven, evacuated from the coastal town of Reedsmouth.

Theodore Cecil, St. John's father, had loved the house and

its surroundings; and had made several improvements. He had built the annexe wing, so that his profession and the visitors it necessitated should not interfere with the amenities of the house itself. He had planted a rose-garden, which even now was the envy of the head gardener at Exton House. And inside the circuit of the wall he had laid a gravel path, to form a walk upon which to take gentle exercise every fine morning before breakfast.

This walk, which was between seven and eight hundred yards long, began at the front entrance gate, with the wall on the left and the lawn, from which the walk was separated by a low and closely-clipped yew hedge, on the right. Very soon the lawn gave place to the wood and the path entered a grove, where the branches of the oak-trees spread over the path, and in places over the wall itself. Here, although the traffic on the main road beyond the wall was clearly audible, it was impossible to see anything of it, for the wall was never less than seven feet high.

Nearly a hundred yards from the beginning of the path, the wall bent at a sharp angle to the right. The path, following it strictly, ran under the shelter of the trees for another hundred yards or more. The wood then ended, and the open paddock began, railed off from the path by a low wooden paling. And here, though the wall was actually the same height as before, it appeared from the path to be much lower, the reason being that the level of the ground inside the wall was much higher than that of the lane outside. Any one of average height walking along the path could see over the wall into the lane.

A second sharp turn to the right ended that section of the path. The next section skirted the paddock for some little way, and then the path entered the space between the outer wall and the wall of the kitchen garden. This space was about eight feet wide; and the walls on either side were so high as to make it impossible to overlook them. On emerging from this enclosed stretch, the path continued for a short distance before reaching the third angle of the triangle. Not many yards beyond this, was the gateway leading into the yard, at which the path ended.

Theodore Cecil had christened this path the Long Walk, and as such it was still known. Until the war it had been kept weeded and in good order, but now it was sadly neglected. The gravel surface had been allowed to become weed-grown, and where grass edges existed, these were ragged and ill-defined. The surrounding wall, however, was still as solid as

when it was built, smooth and unbroken, affording no foothold by which even the most agile of the village urchins could hope to climb

Hermione Cecil and her son Roland were pacing the Long Walk together. It was the morning of Saturday, November 13th, one of those bright autumn mornings which are the refutation of those who malign our English climate. Breakfast was over, and Hermione had seized upon Roland, who had arrived home on a few days' leave only the previous evening. "I wish you'd come with me, dear, and look at the paddock," she had said hurriedly as Wiegler had passed through the baize doorway leading into the annexe. "I've been wondering whether we ought to have more of it ploughed and grow potatoes on it next year. But Tom says it wouldn't be any good, because of the wireworm. I wish you'd come and tell me what you think."

They had gone out together. "I daren't say a word with that Wiegler man about!" Hermione had exclaimed. "I'm sure he's always listening to everything one says."

Roland shook his head. "I doubt it. He strikes me as being too busy airing his own opinions to listen to any one else. He ought to be a dictator, not a doctor."

But Hermione refused to be comforted, and for the next half-hour her son was compelled to listen to a fierce denunciation of Wiegler and all his ways, with special reference to his suspected espionage activities. "And now I've told you everything, Roland dear," Hermione concluded. "You really must do something about it. The whole village is talking, for everybody's seen him looking at things through those field-glasses of his. Besides, he goes out for walks by himself in all weathers, and never says where he's been. It's quite time all that sort of thing was put a stop to. And you're the proper person to do it, now you're in the Secret Service."

Roland winced slightly. "You mustn't talk about that, Mother. And of course I can't do anything on my own responsibility, without having something definite against the chap. I'll keep my eyes open while I'm here, if you like. Where's he gone to now?"

"Into the dispensary, I expect," Hermione replied. "That's another thing about him I don't at all like, Roland dear. Of course, I haven't said anything to either of them about it, for there may be nothing wrong in it. But he spends far too much of his time alone with Miss Draper."

"The deuce he does!" Roland exclaimed. For several

seconds they paced the Long Walk in silence, Roland's thoughts occupied with Eileen Draper, Hermione's fluttering between her dislike of the Wiegler man and the household duties which awaited her. It was typical of Hermione that she should persist in calling the girl, and for that matter addressing her as, Miss Draper. Eileen Draper was the daughter of a colleague of St. John's, who had died suddenly, leaving his large family unprovided for. Her father had had Eileen trained as a dispenser, and St. John, always warmhearted, had taken her on as his own dispenser and secretary. She was a quiet, unassuming little thing, with brown eyes, brown hair, and the gift of keeping as much as possible out of Hermione's way. Corringham called her the Little Brown Mouse. She had lived at Foursquare now for five years, ever since she was nineteen. Hermione had never liked the arrangement, though she had not openly opposed her husband's wishes. If he needed a secretary-dispenser, he must have one, she supposed. But a girl like that living in the house was a horrible responsibility. Men of St. John's age were so susceptible. And there was Roland to be thought of, only two years older than she was. It was a very delicate situation for a devoted wife and conscientious mother.

Hermione had dealt with it by her own methods. Of course, the girl had to have her meals with the family. Any other arrangement would involve too much work for the servants. But there her association with them must end. Hermione saw to it that the potentially-dangerous Miss Draper had her own bedroom and sitting-room in the annexe, above the consulting-room and dispensary. The only way of reaching the annexe from the house proper, short of going out by the front door and in again by the patients' entrance, was by the baize door in the hall. And the spring which controlled this door moved with a curious and most characteristic creak, defying all attempts at cure. There was no mistaking it, you could always tell when any one opened the door. And, of course, in the silence of the night the creak would become more distinctly audible.

But Hermione had devised a subtler barrier than any baize door. Her menfolk must be made to understand that the girl was on an entirely different plane from their own. It must be demonstrated that her place was in that uncertain sphere which had its orbit between the working classes and the people one called upon. She was a dependant, most emphatically not a member of the family. Hermione was pleasant enough to her, in a distant, rather condescending fashion. But to mark

the gulf, so wide as to forbid any approach towards familiarity, the secretary-dispenser was always to her Miss Draper.

"The devil he does!" Roland exclaimed once more, after they had walked some little way in silence. "All right, Mother dear. I'll keep my eyes open, and if I find he is up to any monkey tricks I shall know what to do. What's your programme this morning? I thought of walking down to the House and paying my respects. Care to come with me?"

"In the morning!" Hermione exclaimed. "My dear boy, however do you think I could find time to do anything like that? We've only got one regular maid now, for Lizzie's joined the A.T.S., and you know how scatter-brained Mabel is. I have to do nearly all the dusting, and see that Mabel understands how to get the meals ready. It's really a mercy your father isn't here. These war-time inconveniences would worry him to death. Of course, Sarah Hawthorne comes in to help, but she can only spare a couple of hours in the morning. I must go in now and tell her what I want her to do. And then, when I've finished the dusting, I shall have to go to the shop and see about the weekly rations. But I'd like you to go. You'll find Leonard there, he came home on a few days' leave the day before yesterday."

"Good!" said Roland heartily. "I'll toddle along over there and see them all."

They walked back to the house together, and on entering the hall found Sarah Hawthorne on her knees, polishing the floor. "Sorry I'm late this morning, mum," she said, without desisting from her labours. "I've only just been able to get here. That young rascal Teddy was playing in the garden and he fell down and cut his leg on a sharp flint. I had to stop and tie it up, and that's why I couldn't get here before."

While she was speaking the baize door opened and Dr. Wiegler appeared. He had his professional bag in his hands, and stood there listening. "What's this?" he asked sharply. "Who did you say had cut his leg?"

Sarah Hawthorne did not seem best pleased with the question. "Only young Teddy, the evacuee I'm looking after. He always gets into mischief on Saturdays when he doesn't go to school. But it's nothing. I've put some ointment on it and tied it up nice and tight."

"Ointment!" Wiegler snorted. "What sort of ointment? Where did you get it from?"

"Bunkol," Sarah replied sullenly. "I saw about it in the

paper so I bought some at the shop. The paper says it's wonderful for cuts, bruises, wasp stings and nettlerash."

"What about snakebite and senile decay?" Wiegler asked witheringly. "Upon my word, you people are past praying for. I believe if you saw a stuff advertised which would make you grow wings like angels, you'd buy it. I'll look in and see the boy now, before I start on my rounds."

Sarah scrambled to her feet. "There's no call for you to do that," she replied angrily. "When I want a doctor, I'll send for him, and till then he can stop away."

"Nonsense!" Wiegler exclaimed. "That's just the way with people like you. You don't send for the doctor until your own particular nostrums have done their work and then it is too late. I'm going to bandage that leg properly now, and don't you touch it till I tell you."

He strode out of the front door, and it seemed for a minute as though the infuriated Sarah was about to follow him. But she thought better of it, and turned round despairingly to Hermione. "You're my witness, Mum, that I never asked him to go," she said.

"Of course, Sarah," Hermione replied. "But it's just as well that Dr. Wiegler should see the boy. You never know what a cut may lead to. Blood poisoning and all sorts of horrid things like that."

"I put on plenty of Bunkol," said Sarah obstinately. "Apply freely, it says on the tube. And it made the little rascal holler, so it must have done good. Besides, if it had been Dr. Cecil, I wouldn't have minded. But him!" And having poured all the contempt of which she was capable into that final pronoun, she fell on her knees once more and resumed her polishing.

Roland, who had been an amused spectator of this incident, winked at his mother and went out. His way took him through the village which straggled untidily on either side of the main road. Taken as a whole there was nothing beautiful about it, though many of the individual buildings were good to look at. The stone-built church with its squat tower, for instance. The rectory nearby, ivy-clad, with fine mullion windows. Quenbies, a couple of hundred yards farther on, a small Georgian house, long derelict, but now renovated after a fashion by the Hon. Mrs. Burwash. Roland had grown up with all these, and it gladdened his heart to see them again, utterly unchanged, as he had always remembered them.

He was passing Quenbies, when he was arrested by a strident

voice, "Come here, young man!" Looking up he saw Mrs. Burwash's face appearing above the garden hedge. He had met her before on the occasion of a previous visit, so did not experience the shock which the apparition might have given a stranger. For Mrs Burwash might have sat as the model for the witch in the fairy stories. She was tall and gaunt, with very long limbs and a confirmed stoop. The skin of her face was like parchment stretched over her prominent cheekbones and chin. Her nose was hooked, and her grey hair wild and unkempt. She had presumably been weeding, for in her claw-like hands she held a hoe. Had it been a broomstick Roland would have felt a sense of frustration had she not mounted it and sailed serenely over the chimney-pots.

"Good-morning, Mrs Burwash," he said cheerfully.

"Lovely morning, isn't it?"

"I don't know anything about that," she snapped.

"Where's the doctor? That's what I wanted to know. He promised to come and see me at eleven o'clock about my sprue."

"What on earth was the old image talking about? Roland wondered. "Your what, Mrs Burwash?" he asked politely.

"Never you mind, young man. When you've lived in the tropics as long as I have, you'll know very well what sprue is. Don't stand staring at me like that, but tell me where that fool of a doctor is. He said he'd be here at eleven. It's five minutes past now, and I'm not used to being kept waiting."

"He went out a minute or two before I did," Roland replied.

"Good-morning, Mrs Burwash. I do hope your sprue will soon be better." He walked on heedless of the angry mutterings behind him.

The lodge gate of Exton House was a little farther on, on the opposite side of the road. Roland went in, and walked up the drive towards the house. As he went round the bend, he saw two men coming towards him. He recognised one of them as Corringham's son, by his stiff and halting walk. For Commander Leonard Corringham, D.S.O., R.N., had lost a leg at the battle of Cape Matapan and was not yet quite used to the artificial limb with which it had been replaced. But he violently disapproved of the phrase generally used to explain his disability. "Lost a leg at Matapan!" he had exclaimed more than once. "You must think I'm damn careless. Do you suppose I mislaid it and it fell overboard, or what? I didn't lose it. It was taken off, neatly and quite painlessly, some time afterwards."

As soon as he recovered from his wound, Leonard Corringham had been appointed to the Admiralty, where he had met Captain Desmond Merrion, one of the chiefs of the Naval Intelligence, with whom he had struck up a friendship. As the period of short leave due to them happened to coincide, Leonard had invited Desmond to Exton House. Merrion had accepted readily enough, and it was he who was now strolling through the park with his friend.

"Hallo!" Leonard exclaimed as Roland came in sight. "Here is the lad I was telling you about yesterday evening. Son of the local medico here, and a very decent boy. He's in M.I., so you'll have something in common, though I don't suppose you'll exchange notes in public."

Roland came up and was introduced. "And now you're here, you can join the party." Leonard went on, "Her ladyship says the larder's empty, and the admiral's made a signal that we're to go out on intruder patrol among the birds. We can do with a fourth gun and you can borrow that old Hammond of mine that I've lent you before. But we're shooting for the pot, mind. Don't let your sporting instincts deter you from loosing off at anything that gets up or doesn't get up. We're starting in half an hour's time and taking sandwiches. So ring up your mammy and tell her you won't be home to lunch."

Roland, who was a very fair shot, jumped at the offer. Though he would not have let his mother know it, he found it very difficult to amuse himself at Foursquare under existing conditions. And in due course the party set out, under the leadership of Sir Mark.

Hermione had looked forward to an afternoon with Roland. Instead of which she had to put up with the usual not-very-inspiring routine. Lunch at half-past one, for Dr. Wiegler had insisted that he could not be ready before then. The Wiegler man, Miss Draper, and herself. As a rule Wiegler dominated the conversation, but to-day he was unusually silent, frowning at his plate as though it had been guilty of some personal affront. It was not until nearly the end of the meal that he burst into one of his accustomed tirades.

Only half-listening, Hermione did not quite follow what it was all about. It appeared that the village was honeycombed with lying, deceit and every known form of low cunning. "I'll make some of them suffer for it yet," Wiegler exclaimed. "It's preposterous that such things should be allowed to go on. It's bad enough that there seems to be an epidemic of cretin-

ism. At least ninety per cent of the population are suffering from congenital idiocy. But there's worse than that. The remaining ten per cent are deliberate criminals. You must know that, Mrs Cecil, after all the time you've been here."

"I don't," Hermione replied. "And I'm quite sure my husband doesn't either. I know that a good many of the villagers are slow-thinking. My husband always says that you have to be very patient with them."

"And believe all they tell you into the bargain," Wiegler sneered. "It strikes me that your husband carried his policy of patience much too far, Mrs Cecil. He must have known of some of the cunning frauds I've discovered since I've been here. That fellow Plowman, for instance. As I've said before, it was most unprofessional of him to back Plowman in those jerry-building ventures of his. It's all bound to come out soon. I haven't any intention of letting Plowman get away with his fraud over the air-raid shelter, whatever action Sir Mark may see fit to take in the matter."

"My husband didn't back him in that, anyhow," said Hermione resentfully. "He wasn't here."

"Of course he didn't," Wiegler snapped. "You don't see what I mean. I'm going to show Plowman up over that shelter business. I've warned him that I'm going to see the chairman of the council on Monday and lay the facts before him. There'll be an inquiry, and probably a prosecution. Plowman's affairs will be investigated and your husband's association with him is bound to come out."

"And what if it does?" Hermione asked defiantly. "There was nothing wrong about it. My husband regarded the money he advanced simply as an investment."

"Very possibly he did, Mrs Cecil. But we doctors have to be very careful about our investments, and about many other things besides. The way in which we accept our patients' statements, for instance. Don't you see the construction that might be placed upon the help your husband gave Plowman in building those bungalows? It might be said that he did so in order to increase the population of the village and so to augment his practice. And that, I feel sure, would be regarded as highly unprofessional conduct, as I have warned you before."

"Unprofessional or not, I fail to see that it is any business of yours," Hermione replied.

"It is a doctor's business to refuse to countenance any irregularity or fraud, wherever he may find it. Plowman is merely an example of the deception which flourishes in the

village. I have another case in mind, of a particularly mean and disgraceful nature. I have given the culprit a week in which to confess the fraud that has been practised. If this has not been done at the end of that period I shall certainly expose it publicly."

The meal came to an end at last. Hermione rose, and Wiegler hastened to open the dining-room door for her. Eileen Draper followed her out and effaced herself beyond the baize door. Wiegler, who regarded Saturday afternoon as his half-holiday, put on his hat and a dark overcoat, swung his binoculars over his shoulder and set off sharply down the drive.

From her seat in the drawing-room window Hermione watched him maliciously until he disappeared. She wished Roland had been there to see him going off with those field-glasses of his. Wiegler had shown them to her once and she had seen that they were of German make. Where had he got them and what use did he make of them? No wonder people were getting suspicious. She really must insist on Roland doing something.

The man's trade at lunch had left her with no more than a feeling of profound irritation. She had heard it so often before, the denunciation of the villagers as stupid or evilly-disposed, the threats to expose someone or other. He was one of those people who go about looking for trouble. Last week it had been Tom Docking the gardener, who had worked at Four-square before Hermione had married. The Wiegler man had got it into his head that he was wasting his time. The paths weren't properly weeded, the flower-garden was in a terrible state, the vegetables were a disgrace, the greenhouse was neglected. Wiegler had explained these deficiencies to Hermione. He could not stand by and watch a man deliberately defrauding his employer. In spite of all that Hermione could say to dissuade him, he had insisted on giving him a good talking to.

Tom, completely taken aback by this attack from an unexpected quarter, had said very little at the time. But, later, he had tackled Hermione. If she was dissatisfied with his work, she might tell him so herself, after all the years he'd worked for the family. If she wasn't, then what call had that bloody—beg your pardon, mum—interfering foreigner to tell him off. He'd be better by far looking to his pills and potions than trying to tell other people what he knew nothing about. It had taken all Hermione's tact to smooth out Tom's ruffled feelings.

Now her mind harked back to the rumours circulating in the village. After all, what did she, or St John either, know about the Wiegler man? Nothing whatever. He had descended upon the village only a few hours before her husband's departure. St John had refused to put himself out unduly over finding a locum to take his place. "There's no need to worry," he had assured his anxious wife. "Lots of people will jump at the chance of coming here. I'll pass the word round, and you'll find we'll be besieged with applications."

But St John's optimism was not justified, for not a single application came. It had only been at the last moment, after frantic exchange of telegrams with an agency, that the post had been filled. Late one evening had arrived Dr Kurt Wiegler, M.D., B.Ch., F.R.C.P., M.R.C.S., polite in a business-like way, and radiating efficiency at every pore. There could be no questioning the ability of a man with such a string of letters after his name. And next morning St John had departed on the first stage of his journey to foreign parts. The Wiegler man had been accepted on the strength of his professional qualifications alone.

Hermione's mind was moving slowly and not very brilliantly on these lines, when she caught sight of a second figure moving down the drive, Miss Draper on her bicycle. There was nothing extraordinary in this. It had been arranged long ago that Miss Draper should have Saturday afternoon free. Hermione had thoroughly approved of the arrangement, for this ordained period of freedom classed Miss Draper among the employees of the house. Now and then Hermione had remembered to ask her perfunctorily where she had been and whether she had enjoyed herself.

Miss Draper's demure reply had usually been that she had ridden over to Marbeach to do some shopping, and that she had had a very nice time, thank you very much, Mrs Cecil. But now, her nerves fretted into suspicion of everybody, Hermione wondered, was she in the habit of meeting the Wiegler man, and did they spend their afternoons together? If so, what transpired between them? It was all very disturbing.

Sighing heavily at the thoughts of the annoyances which encompassed her, Hermione left the window seat and settled herself down at her bureau to write letters. She was bound to stay within earshot of the telephone-bell, for Mabel could not be trusted to take messages properly, and letter-writing was the only way of passing the time she could think of. She was

to engaged when the door opened and Mrs Laverock was announced.

Mrs. Laverock was an earnest and imposing woman, who took her duties as the rector's wife very seriously indeed. She explained that she had called to enlist Hermione's support for a jumble sale which she was getting up in aid of the comforts for Civil Defence Workers' Fund. But this matter disposed of, the conversation became more general, and finally reached, as all conversation in Exton Forcett seemed bound sooner or later to reach, the subject of Dr. Wiegler.

Mrs. Laverock had rather a curious experience to relate. That morning she had been arranging the flowers in church in readiness for the next day. When she had finished this, it had occurred to her to call on Mrs Burwash before going home to lunch. Quenbies was packed with all sorts of curios, and perhaps she might be persuaded to part with some of them for the benefit of the jumble sale. But as Mrs Laverock had approached the house, she had become aware of a violent altercation going on in the front garden. "I could hear Mrs. Burwash shrieking at someone, my dear, but at first I couldn't see who it was. And then, when I got to the gap in the hedge, I saw it was Dr Wiegler."

"I'm not surprised," said Hermione. "He takes a delight in putting people's backs up. Did you hear what the trouble was about?"

"Of course I didn't stop to listen. But I couldn't help hearing some of the things that Mrs Burwash said. She seemed to be very much upset about a screw. I couldn't understand that at all. But she called Dr. Wiegler the most dreadful names. I distinctly heard her tell him that he knew no more about her screw than a bald-faced chimpanzee. I was so glad the rector wasn't there to hear her. He would have been terribly shocked."

Hermione was not sorry to think that the Wiegler man had met his match in Mrs Burwash. But the conversation drifted on to something else and very soon Mrs Laverock left. She couldn't stay to tea, for she must go on to the House and talk to Lady Corringham about the rummage sale.

So Hermione was left alone once more. She had tea by herself over the drawing-room fire, she helped Mabel with the black-out. At half-past five Roland came home, jubilant and bearing a brace of partridges and a rabbit. They'd had a marvellous day, must have walked pretty nearly ten miles. Wonderful old chap Sir Mark was. He'd stuck it out as well.

as any of them, and seemed as fresh as a daisy when they got home Leonard Corringham's friend, Captain Merrion, was wizard. Simply couldn't miss the most difficult birds. Poor old Leonard had to chuck his hand in half-way through the afternoon. He couldn't manage the rougher places with his artificial leg. They'd got quite a decent bag between them, and Lady Corringham had said he was to tell his mother that she could have a brace of pheasants as well if she liked.

Hermione listened to all this rather absently. "I'm so glad you enjoyed yourself, my dear. It would be nice to have a brace of pheasants. They'd come in very well towards the end of the week, when it's always difficult to think of anything for dinner. I shall see Sylvia after church to-morrow, and I can thank her then. Now I must go and see if Miss Draper's back yet, so that I can switch the telephone through to the dispensary. I've had it on in the hall all the afternoon."

"Oh, yes, Eileen's back," Roland replied in a careless tone. "I met her on her bicycle as I was walking back from the House, and we came in together. I'll switch the telephone over for you."

Hermione frowned slightly as he went out. It always irritated her that her husband and her son persisted in calling the girl by her Christian name, in spite of the example she set them. And she didn't altogether like what Roland had said. If the girl had been out on her bicycle when they had met, and they had come in together, she must have got off and walked home with him. That sort of thing mustn't be encouraged. Hermione told herself that she must keep her eyes open while Roland was at home. Where had he gone to now? The fact that she had not heard that tell-tale creak reassured her.

Roland did not reappear, but after a while she heard him tramping about overhead. His mother guessed that he was washing and changing after his day's shooting. And, curiously enough, the Wiegler man hadn't shown himself. It was almost half-past six, from which time until half-past seven the surgery was open to patients. He must have come in by the annexe entrance, a thing Hermione had never known him do before.

But it seemed that he hadn't come in that way, after all. For, just upon seven o'clock, Miss Draper appeared, wearing the white cap and apron she always assumed when on duty. "Excuse me, Mrs. Cecil," she said, "can you tell me where Dr. Wiegler is? He hasn't come to the surgery this evening."

"I don't know where he is, Miss Draper," Hermione replied.

"He went out directly after lunch and I haven't seen him since. He's sure to be back before very long."

"I hope so. I can manage most of the patients. But there are one or two he really ought to see." And Miss Draper vanished in her usual quiet and unobtrusive manner.

Hermione wondered vaguely where the man had got to. Whatever his faults, he was certainly most regular and punctual in his habits. It was most unlike him to be late for his surgery hours. No doubt he would turn up with some explanation or other.

But when Mabel sounded the dinner-gong at eight o'clock, he hadn't turned up. Hermione, Roland and Miss Draper assembled in the dining-room and sat down. "I'm not going to wait for him," said Hermione with decision. "I can't understand where he can be all this time. Did you manage all right with the patients, Miss Draper?"

"Most of them only wanted medicine, and I was able to see to them. But there were half a dozen or so who particularly wanted to see the doctor. As he hadn't come by half-past seven, I sent them away and told them to come again to-morrow morning. But they weren't very pleased at having wasted all that time for nothing."

"I'll bet they weren't," said Roland. "I wonder where the dickens Wiegler's got to? He's no business to go off like that, leaving his patients in the lurch. Didn't he say anything before he went out?"

Both Hermione and Miss Draper shook their heads. "I saw him go out with his field-glasses directly after lunch," the former replied. "But he didn't tell me where he was going. He nearly always goes out like that on Saturday afternoons. He's told me that he watches the birds."

"Watches the birds!" Roland exclaimed. "He can't be watching birds all this time, unless he can see in the dark. And it was getting dark when we came in at half-past five, wasn't it, Eileen?"

"I don't think Dr. Wiegler could have seen much very long after that," she replied demurely.

"I heard that you and Roland came in together, Miss Draper," said Hermione icily. "I hope you enjoyed your afternoon. Where did you go?"

"It was such a lovely afternoon that I went for a long ride on my bicycle. Almost to Reedsmouth and back. And I hardly saw anybody till I met Mr. Cecil in the village."

Was it Hermione's fancy, or had the girl faltered as she

called him Mr Cecil? Had it been on the tip of her tongue to say Roland, and had she checked herself just in time? Had their meeting that afternoon been wholly accidental? These, and other disturbing questions consequent upon them kept Hermione's mind busy until the end of dinner

And still there was no sign of the Wiegler man.

CHAPTER THREE

IN THE dim grey light which preceded the dawn, the Brooks, as the water meadows stretching northwards from Exton Forcett were locally called, seemed to stretch out interminably, flat and desolate. A faint mist, rising from the deep dykes intercepting them, hovered and wreathed above, like steam from a boiling pan. And the deep silence was broken only by the cry of some unseen bird or the scuttling of a rabbit through the sedge.

Over this deserted waste a figure moved with infinite caution. Seen working in the garden of Foursquare, Tom Docking might seem heavy of foot and slow of movement. But out here on the Brooks, with his coat bulging suspiciously and his gun ready for immediate action, he was active as the quarry he sought. It was an open secret that the Docking family, who lived in one of the cottages under the shadow of the wall enclosing the Foursquare grounds, never lacked something to put in the pot.

But this Sunday morning Tom had not done so well as usual. He seemed to have the gift of seeing in the dark, for twice he had stalked rabbits which no one else could have seen, and each time he had bowled them over with that gun of his which made so little noise. But two rabbits were a miserably poor bag. Usually the Brooks were alive with them. It must have been the squire and his party, shooting up the whole countryside the day before, that had scared them. Now it was getting light, and he dare not risk many more shots.

There was one spot left which had never yet failed him. To the south and east of the Brooks the land rose steeply, and was crowned with a growth of pine-trees, known as Gallows Wood. Beneath the thickest part of this wood, gravel had once been dug, the diggers eating into the hillside and leaving what was in effect a quarry with almost vertical sides. The floor of the quarry was covered with gravel and boulders, some of them

large enough to hide a man crouching behind them. And in front of them was a stretch of short and springy turf, on which the rabbits loved to nibble.

As he approached the place Tom could see in the growing light the flicker of a dozen white scuts. To the inexperienced it would have been a difficult problem to get within range without scaring them underground. But it was not so with Tom. Moving like a wraith of mist and with as little noise, he worked his way round under the wall of the gravel pit towards a boulder, under cover of which he could creep up unobserved. Then all at once he came to a sudden stop, becoming as he did so invisible against the background of the pit. His sharp eyes had warned him that someone was already lying behind the very boulder he was making for.

He stood stock-still and waited for the other man to move. But this he seemed in no hurry to do. He was lying flat on his face, with arms and legs spread out, as though he had stretched himself out to sleep on the rough gravel floor of the pit. For fully five minutes Tom watched him in the growing light. Then, cautiously and noiselessly, he glided towards him. It was not until he saw the dark stain on the gravel surrounding the man's head that he realised that he was dead.

Tom had no aversion to dead rabbits, but the sudden vision of a dead man at that hour of the morning sent him into a panic. Forgetting his previous caution he took to his heels, his boots scattering the loose gravel as he ran. The rabbits scuttled away in a flash, and a peewit rose from the ground, calling indignantly. But not until he was well clear of the path did Tom come to a halt.

He stood there, open-eyed and open-mouthed, panting heavily, while pink stripes spread across the sky above Gallows Wood. It was close upon sunrise, and a chilly gust of wind struck from the northward across the Brooks, making Tom shiver violently. But the touch of the cold air dispelled his momentary panic. A dead man couldn't do him any harm, after all. Feeling thoroughly ashamed of himself, he walked briskly back to the spot. He could see much better now, for although the floor of the pit was still in shadow, it was almost broad daylight beyond. And as he approached the body he recognised the closely-cropped hair and dark overcoat of Dr. Wiegler.

Closer inspection confirmed this. Dr. Wiegler was lying close under the vertical wall of the pit, at a place where this was fifty to sixty feet high. It seemed as though he had fallen

from above on to the uneven and boulder-strewn ground below. His hat had fallen some little distance away, and though the case of his binoculars was still slung over his shoulder, the binoculars themselves lay shattered within a yard or so of his outstretched right hand.

Tom's first thought was that it was a good riddance. There'd be no more finding fault or poking round into other people's business. His second thought concerned his own line of action. Should he raise the alarm, or go quietly home and leave the body to be found by someone else? If he gave the alarm, it would not be easy to explain his business on the Brooks at that hour on Sunday morning. But if he didn't, and any one found out that he'd been that way, it would be even more awkward. On the whole the simplest course would be the best.

He set off, climbing the steep slope beside the gravel pit, until he reached the heart of Gallows Wood. Here there was a deep dry ditch, overgrown with bracken, and in this he hid his gun and the two rabbits he had shot. Then he strode on, emerging from the shadows of the trees into the bright sunrise. The nearest human habitation was Exton House, and here Tom determined to go with his news. The squire would know what was the proper thing to do.

Tom crossed a wide field, and reached a gate leading into the park beyond. The gate was locked, but he climbed it easily enough. A quarter of a mile away down the park the back of Exton House stood up, the windows rose-coloured where they caught the rays of the rising sun. Tom carried no watch, but he knew well enough what time the sun rose and set. It must now be just after a quarter-past eight.

Reaching the back door, he hammered loudly upon it. It was opened by Yates, the old butler, who stared at Tom in indignant surprise. "Why, whatever's brought you here at this time in the morning, Tom Docking?" he demanded.

"Trouble enough," Tom replied. "There's Dr. Wiegler lying in Gallows Wood pit with his head all bashed in. And I've come along to tell the squire about it."

"You'd better come inside," said Yates shortly. He took Tom into his own pantry, a lofty stone-floored chamber with cupboards all round it. "You stay there till I come and fetch you," he added.

Tom had not long to wait before the butler reappeared. He was taken through what seemed to him a maze of corridors and was eventually led into the hall, where Sir Mark was

standing before a blazing log fire. "Good-morning, Docking," he said "What is this news you've got to tell? Sit down and tell me all about it"

Awkwardly Tom sat down, cap in hand, and painfully conscious of his muddy leggings and ragged coat. As he told his story haltingly, first Merrion and then Leonard Corringham came down the wide stairway. The three men listened quietly until Tom had come to an end. And then Sir Mark spoke. "You're quite sure that he's dead, are you, Docking?"

"Quite sure, sir," Tom replied. "It looks as if he'd fallen right on top of a big lump of stone and bashed his head in. There's a terrible lot of blood round about."

"Very well. We'll get you to take us to the place very shortly. Get breakfast served at once, will you, Yates? And see that Docking has some too"

Tom, profoundly relieved at not having been asked the question he had dreaded, was led away and Sir Mark turned to the other two. "Docking's a thoroughly reliable chap, and he wouldn't come here on Sunday morning to tell us fairy stories. Especially as it's perfectly obvious that he was out poaching on the Brooks. We needn't waste time guessing how this happened until we know more about it. I'll ring up Foxcroft, our local policeman. And I think I'd better get on to Dr. Woodcock at Marbeach and get him to come over"

By the time that Sir Mark had finished telephoning, Yates announced that breakfast was ready. "We can get something inside us, if we hurry," said Sir Mark. "Foxcroft is going to ring up the sergeant at Marbeach and ask him to meet us here. Then he'll come here himself with a stretcher. Woodcock says he'll be over in twenty minutes"

"What are we going to do with the body, Admiral?" Leonard asked as he helped himself to a generous-plate of porridge. "You haven't established a mortuary here, have you?"

"The A R P people have arranged that in case of emergency one of the loose-boxes in the stables here is to be used as a mortuary," Sir Mark replied. "And it strikes me we'd better put the body there. Hermone Cecil won't want it at Four-square. We can bring it in between us on the stretcher. And until the police have seen it, I think we'd better say nothing"

As they were finishing a rapidly-eaten breakfast, people began to arrive at Exton House. First Foxcroft the policeman, tall, grizzled and with a broad, not unintelligent face, bearing a stretcher. Then Sergeant Briston from Marbeach on his

motor-cycle, big, burly, but, as Merrion noticed, with keen and alert eyes. Finally Dr Woodcock, also from Marbeach, in his car. He was a restless little man in spectacles, who seemed quite unable to sit or stand still. As though a colony of ants had made their way inside his underclothes, Merrion thought.

With the arrival of Dr. Woodcock the party was complete, and set out, seven in all. Leonard Corringham had been persuaded to stay behind. With his artificial leg he wouldn't be much use as a stretcher-bearer, especially over rough ground. This left Sir Mark, Merrion, Dr Woodcock, the sergeant, Foxcroft, Yates and Tom, who led the way. They crossed the park to the gate, which Sir Mark unlocked, then along the edge of the field to the outskirts of Gallows Wood. From here Tom, carefully avoiding the ditch where he had hidden his gun and rabbits, took them down the hill on to the Brooks, and so round into the pit by the way he had entered it himself.

The body still lay where he had first seen it, and the party grouped themselves round it in a circle. Dr Woodcock lifted one of the outstretched hands and let it fall again. "Yes, he's dead," he said. "And by the look of that blood he's been lying here some time."

Sergeant Briston took out his note-book, licked his pencil and began making notes. Date, time, place and so forth. Position of body. Extensive injuries to head. Nature of ground, gravel with several large stones. Deceased had apparently fallen over edge of pit. Briston read through his notes, then turned to Foxcroft, "Lend me a hand to turn him over," he said.

Between them they rolled the body over on to its back. The face, though severely injured, was recognisable beyond any doubt. Dr. Wiegler had been well known by sight to all those present, with the single exception of Merrion, who looked at the upturned face with interest. There was a severe contusion on the forehead, as on the nose and chin. The face had been resting on the rounded surface of a boulder, and this was covered in dried blood. The dark overcoat was buttoned up, but one of the buttons had been nearly torn off and hung by a thread. Protruding from under the collar of the overcoat were a couple of pine-needles, and Merrion noticed that another of them had made its way between the soft linen collar Dr. Wiegler was wearing and the skin of his throat. Briston made a few more rapid notes, apparently as to the identity of the deceased, for

he looked up and asked, "Can any of you gentlemen tell me Dr. Wiegler's Christian name?"

"Kurt," Sir Mark replied "K, U, R, T. He was an Austrian by birth, I believe, and became a naturalised British subject some years ago. That, at least, is what he told me."

As Briston wrote down this unfamiliar name in block letters, in his note-book, Merriem detached himself from the circle and strolled quietly away out of the gravel pit. He climbed the steep slope beside it, into the fringes of Gallows Wood. From here, he made his way towards the edge of the pit, whence he could look down upon the scene below.

He found that the pine-trees of Gallows Wood did not extend as far as the brink of the pit where the cliff was highest, but stopped short some ten yards or so of it. Between the last of the trees and the edge was an irregular strip of close hard turf which, as Merriem could see from the droppings, had recently been cropped by sheep. At one point of the brink the turf had crumbled away, leaving a gap of raw earth a few inches wide. There was no fence or hedge of any sort protecting the pit, and there was thus nothing to prevent any one walking over the edge in the dark.

Merriem had no wish to follow Dr. Wiegler's example, so he did not approach the edge too closely, for fear it might crumble away beneath his feet. He stood a yard or so back looking out over the country to the north-westward. The Brooks occupied the floor of a wide valley, beyond which the ground rose again in gentle ploughed slopes. Appearing from behind these was a faint haze of smoke which Merriem knew must proceed from the coast town of Reedsmouth some ten miles distant from where he stood. To the left of the valley lay Marbeach, not more than three miles away, with its houses hidden by the folds of the ground, and only the extreme top of the church steeple showing.

The Brooks seemed alive with birds, and no better place than this grassy platform above the pit could have been chosen from which to watch them. A flock of gulls had swept in from seaward, and now appeared as white dots on the surface of the meadows. Even as Merriem stood there, a heron sailed into sight and dropped on the bank of one of the intersecting dykes, along which it stalked majestically. And in the distance a flight of duck rose from a pool and wheeled away out of sight.

Merriem turned away reluctantly, and made his way back through Gallows Wood to rejoin the party. He observed that

beneath the trees the ground was thickly covered with pine-needles and that here and there were clearings, overgrown with bracken. As he descended the slope he saw that the body of Dr. Wiegler had been placed on the stretcher, which was now being carried by the sergeant and Foxcroft between them.

With frequent change of bearers, in which every member of the party took his turn, the stretcher was carried the half-mile or so to the stables of Exton House, where it was deposited in one of the loose-boxes. Dr. Woodcock and the two police remained with the body to carry out their examination. Tom was dismissed, with orders to keep his mouth shut. Ya disappeared to his own quarters. And Sir Mark and Merriham proceeded to the library. Here they found Leonard Corringham, engrossed in the Sunday paper, which had just been delivered.

"Hallo!" he said as they came in. "I had to tell her ladyship where you'd all gone to, but I haven't said any hi to any one else. It was Wiegler, I suppose?"

His father nodded. "Yes, it was Wiegler all right. He was terribly injured, poor chap. Tom Docking wasn't far wrong when he said that his head was all bashed in. He fell into the pit on to one of those boulders. We shall hear what Woodcock and the police have to say."

They had not long to wait before Yates showed the three into the room, and at a sign from his master, waited by the door. Dr. Woodcock, sitting on the arm of a chair and swinging one leg restlessly, was the first to speak. "No need to look very far for the cause of death," he said. "There are contusions all over the front of the body but the injuries to the head were the fatal ones. You can't expect a chap to fall headlong fifty feet or so on to stony ground and get away with it. The appearances show that the accident must have happened yesterday afternoon or evening."

"He must have walked over the edge of the pit in the dark," Briston commented. "But what was he doing there? He can't have been on his way to see a patient, for there are no houses that way. And what about those field-glasses we picked up? They're worrying me a bit."

"Perhaps I may be able to explain," said Sir Mark. "Just a week ago to-day Dr. Wiegler was lunching here and in the course of conversation he told me that the study of birds was his hobby, and that the Brooks was a perfect place for a bird-watcher. You went up to the place he must have fallen from just now, didn't you, Captain Merriham?"

"I did," Merrion replied. "And during the minute or two I was there I saw quite a number of birds on the Brooks. I don't think there is much doubt about what Dr. Wiegler was doing."

The sergeant seemed very much relieved. "Watching birds, was he? Well, that's harmless enough. But how do you suppose he came to fall over the edge like that, sir?"

Sir Mark, to whom this question was addressed, shrugged his shoulders. "Nobody can say exactly," he replied. "But something like this must have happened. Dr. Wiegler was standing between the end of Gallows Wood and the edge of the pit, watching the birds. I know the place well enough, for I rented the shooting there at one time, though I've given it up now. At that time there was no sort of fence round the edge of the pit, and I don't suppose there is now."

"There isn't," Merrion remarked. "It struck me as being a dangerous sort of place. Apart from there being no fence, the edge of the pit is only loose soil, which would probably give way if one stood on it. As a matter of fact a bit of it has given way quite recently, directly above the spot at which the body was lying."

"Well, there you are!" Sir Mark exclaimed. "Dr. Wiegler stayed watching the birds until it got too dark to see any longer. Yesterday the sun set a few minutes after five, and it gets dark pretty quickly at this time of year. He started to walk forward, not realising how near the edge of the pit he was, and not being able to see it clearly. The edge gave way under him, as you've heard Captain Merrion say, and of course he fell without being able to save himself."

This explanation found general acceptance, and the informal inquest ended. Dr. Woodcock went back to Marbeach in his car. The sergeant, wheeling his motor-cycle, walked with Foxcroft to the latter's house. Sir Mark undertook to let Mrs. Cecil know that her husband's locum was dead. Life at Exton House settled down to its normal Sunday routine.

"Sir Mark knows what he's talking about," said Briston, as he sat in Foxcroft's front room with his note-book open before him. "That's how it happened, you may be sure of that. There's only just one thing. He didn't chuck himself into the pit on purpose, did he?"

"Not Dr. Wiegler!" Foxcroft replied emphatically. "He was far too cocksure of himself for that. He wasn't the sort of chap to commit suicide, not he. More likely to have driven other people to suicide. He's done nothing but pester people

ever since he's been in the place. Only a week or so back wanted Mr. Plowman, the builder, prosecuted because one his men had met with an accident. And Mr. Plowman isn't only one he's been barking at, not by a long way. There won't be many in the place who'll be sorry to hear what's happened.

The sergeant nodded. "I've heard he wasn't ex-
popular. I know that some of Dr. Cecil's old patients from
would rather come all the way to Marbeach to see Dr. W-
cock or Dr. Blesborough than go to him. And I suppose it
birds he was looking at through those glasses of his and
other things."

"Ah!" said Foxcroft meaningly. "That's not for me to tell. You heard what Sir Mark said, and he's a magistrate. But it is true enough that Dr. Wiegler was foreign born. And it's my belief that all foreigners are fifth columnists, or worse."

"Well, he's dead now, and he won't do any more harm. We shall have to find out if any one saw him hanging about the Gallows Wood. How would he have got there? Through the park and across the fields, like we did?"

"He's not likely to have gone that way if he started from the Cecils' house," Foxcroft replied. "It would be shorter for him to keep to the Marbeach road, through the village and past the lodge entrance to the House. A little way beyond that there's a lane turning off to the right just by that big clump of rhododendrons. You've seen it, I dare say?"

"Yes, I've seen it right enough, but I've never been along the lane. Where does it lead to?"

"It doesn't lead anywhere now. They call it Mill Lane, and it used to lead to a windmill that stood beside Gallows Wood. The foundations are there still, but they're all overgrown with bracken. And if you keep on beyond where the mill used to be, you get into Gallows Wood that way. That's how Dr. Wiegler got there, I don't doubt."

"If he went through the village, somebody will have seen him," said Briston. "You'd better dodge round and make inquiries. And you'd better have a look at the place where he fell over, that Captain Merriam spoke about. Who's he, by the way?"

"I couldn't say," Foxcroft replied. "A friend of Commander Corringham's, staying at the House, as I understand. He was out shooting with them yesterday, I know."

"All right. It's time I was getting back. I'll have to the coroner know and arrange about the inquest. Ring me this evening round about one o'clock. Good night."

The sergeant went off on his motor-cycle, and a few minutes later Foxcroft sallied forth to start his inquiries. Not for a moment would he have ventured to pit his own opinion against that of the sergeant and of so distinguished a person as Sir Mark Corringham. Promotion did not lie in that direction, and promotion was Foxcroft's ambition. But, all the same, the vision of Dr Wiegler standing with his binoculars to his eyes near the edge of that impressive gravel pit haunted him. A push from behind, even quite a gentle one, and he would have stumbled forward on to the treacherous brink. And there were many people who would have been only too glad of the chance.

Foxcroft knew better than most what went on in Exton Forcett. A village policeman is frequently at a disadvantage in this respect. He is regarded with a certain amount of awe as the representative of law, which imposes certain restrictions on the liberty of the subject. People are shy of confiding in him, unless and until they have a grievance against their neighbour. But Foxcroft had a brother-in-law, who, quite unconsciously acted as his intelligence department. Bob Tipping, his wife's younger brother, suffered from what was always referred to in the family as a weak chest, and had in consequence been rejected for military service. He was a man in the thirties, short and spare, but by no means emaciated, and very clever with his hands, which he could turn to anything, from cutting hair to repairing clocks. It was customary in Exton Forcett if you wanted anything mended or a job done that nobody else knew how to tackle to send for Bob. You might be sure that he would deal with the situation capably and cheerfully. And while he was in the house he would inevitably pick up any gossip current there.

Bob lived with the Foxcrofts and had a workshop of his own in a shed behind their home. Foxcroft, who had always got on very well with him, used often to sit in the workshop while Bob was doing a job, and listen to his unceasing flow of talk. In this way he got to know what people were saying, and of late one of the principal topics in the village had been Dr. Wiegler. More than a few dark threats had been uttered against the doctor. Had one of these been put into effect?

It was twelve o'clock when Foxcroft went out into the village street, and the congregation were coming out of church. The party from the House were there, Sir Mark and Lady Corringham, Commander Corringham and Captain Merrion. They were walking very slowly in the direction of Foursquare,

in earnest conversation with Mrs Cecil and her son Mrs Cecil looked even more worried than she usually Foxcroft thought. No doubt the news of Dr Wiegler's had been broken to her by now He'd have to see her and a few formal questions some time, but not now Striding away in the opposite direction was Mrs Burwash, with a bright coat and a hat exactly like an iron saucepan. She held a furlled umbrella by the middle, and shook it aggressively Following her, but at a slower pace, was a group positively radiating respectability. Mr. Plowman, a heavily-built with a walrus moustache, in his black Sunday suit and bowler hat. Mrs Plowman, stout and florid, with a fur coat and a hat of the latest fashion, as interpreted in Marbeach, and a dizzily on the anterior portion of her head Ethel Plowman, a younger version of her mother, but with a distressing expression. And Archie Plowman, also black-suited and bowler-hatted, with a cherubic expression upon his round and moonlike face.

Foxcroft eyed this group speculatively. He knew all the air-raid shelter, Sambourne's accident, and the view that Dr Wiegler had taken of these things. Had any of the family had a hand in whatever it was that had happened the previous evening? Not necessarily Plowman himself But what about young Archie? It had always been a mystery why he was not called up Helping his father on work of national importance was the pretence But Foxcroft knew well enough that the help he gave was almost wholly imaginary Archie was a slacker and, for all his church-going and sanctimonious expression, something of a bad character There had been more than one row in the village of which Foxcroft had good reason to suspect Archie of being the instigator

And then, among the rapidly-dispersing congregation, Foxcroft saw a solitary figure, and made his way towards him This was Bert Hawthorne, propelling himself slowly, though with ease, in his wheel-chair

Ever since his accident, Bert in his wheel-chair had been among the common objects of the countryside As soon as St John Cecil had perceived that the injuries he had received by falling from the roof would make it impossible for him ever to walk again, a committee had been formed in the village, with Lady Corringham as chairman The subscriptions raised had been more than sufficient to meet the cost of the chair, and the balance had been invested in Bert's name in the Post Office Savings Bank In addition to this, Mr Plowman, under the pressure of public opinion, had undertaken to allow

get a pension of four pounds a week. So that Bert, hale and hearty enough but for the paralysis of both his legs, was quite reasonably provided for.

Being of a sociable nature, he made full use of the mobility provided by the chair, which was of the self-propelling type, driven by handcranks on either side. Seated in it, he was usually to be found somewhere about the village. He never failed to attend Matins on Sundays, willing helpers were always to be found to lift him and his chair bodily up the low steps of the porch and so into the body of the church. On fine mornings he would propel himself as far as the White Bull, where he would take up his position beside the long wooden bench outside the door, favoured by half a dozen of the older inhabitants. At other times he would take the air either in the village itself or for short distances along the roads surrounding it. And he was always more than ready to converse with any one he met.

This morning he was well wrapped up against the cold, and he grinned at Foxcroft over the folds of a grey woollen muffler.

"Good-morning, Mr Foxcroft," he opened conversationally. "Nice morning for the time of year. But there's a change coming. I can feel it in these old legs of mine. They always start aching when there's rain about."

"Shouldn't wonder," Foxcroft replied absently. "You were about the village yesterday afternoon, I dare say?"

"Sure I was, on such a fine day. I was out pretty well the whole afternoon. There weren't any peace to be had at home, for Sarah always turns the house upside down on Saturday afternoons."

"I thought you might have been," said Foxcroft. "Did you by any chance see anything of Dr Wiegler?"

At the mention of the doctor's name Bert's face went purple, and the veins in his neck swelled. "What do you want to ask me about him for?" he asked suspiciously.

There was no sense in trying to make a secret of what had happened. The news would be all over the village by dinner-time, and Bert was bound to hear it when he got home, if not before.

"Dr. Wiegler's body was found in Gallows Wood pit this morning," Foxcroft said simply.

"His body?" Bert exclaimed. "He's dead, then? Serve the blighter right, that's all I've got to say. He won't be able to put his head in where he's not wanted now."

"What had you got against him, then?" Foxcroft asked.

"I don't know that I had any more against him than of others that he's interfered with. I'll tell you how it was. Yesterday morning the lad that's billeted with us fell down and cut his leg. It wasn't anything much, and Sarah tied it up for him. And when she got to Mrs Cecil's, where she works in the mornings, she told her about it. That Wiggler heard what she was saying and came straight away to our place. Sarah never asked him to, so he hadn't any right. That's plain enough, surely."

Foxcroft nodded. He had heard many instances of similar behaviour on Dr Wiegler's part before now. "You were at home when Dr Wiegler arrived?" he asked.

"Yes, I was sitting there listening to the wireless, and the lad was playing about. The doctor came right in, without asking leave. He caught hold of the boy and tore off the rag Sarah had tied round his leg. He said something I didn't rightly catch about old women meddling. He tied up the leg again with some stuff of his own, and then he caught sight of the pot of Bunkol that Sarah had bought at the shop only last week. And if you'll believe me he opened the door and chucked the pot right in the middle of the patch of sprouts. 'That's the best place for that,' he said. 'The worst it can do there is to kill the caterpillars.' I was that mad with the way he went on that if I could have moved from where I was sitting, I'd have punched his head."

"He was like that," said Foxcroft. "Did you see him again after that?"

"Yes. I saw him after dinner. It was this way, I'd come out in the old chair and was on my way through the village, when I stopped and had a word with Bob Tipping, who'd come out of your place and was going along towards the Allotments. And while we were talking Dr Wiegler came away from Mrs Cecil's, with those field-glasses of his over his shoulder. He was walking fast as though he was in a hurry to meet someone, and he hadn't a word for me, though he passed quite close. I saw him go along past the lodge gates and up the Marbeach road, and that's all."

"Were there many people about the village at the time?" Foxcroft asked.

"I don't recollect that there were. Most of them was finishing their dinners, I expect. The only other person I saw besides Bob was Mrs Burwash at Quenbies. She was pottering about that front garden of hers as usual."

"Did you tell any one that you had seen Dr. Wiegler?"

"I did mention it to Mr. Plowman, I believe. I went on to see him after I left Bob, as I always do on Saturday afternoons, for the money he gives me. But I didn't tell any one else, for I didn't see anybody. After I left Mr. Plowman's, I went a little way along the Marbeach road and stopped there. There's a sheltered place by that clump of rhododendrons that gets the sun in the afternoon, and I like to sit there whiles and watch the folk go past. Not that there's much traffic to be seen along the roads these days."

"Some people did go past, I suppose, for all that," Foxcroft suggested.

"Not so very many. Mostly folk on bikes, going into Marbeach. Young Mrs. Forbes, whose husband was home on leave a little while back and two or three more with her. That girl from Foursquare who mixes his medicines for the doctor. I dare say there were a few more, but I don't remember them. And there was one man, a stranger, for I didn't know him. He came from Marbeach way and turned up Mill Lane."

Foxcroft pricked up his ears at this. "A stranger?" he asked. "What did he look like?"

"Well, I don't know," Bert explained doubtfully. "He was a red-haired, foxy-looking chap and he was wearing grey trousers and a brown coat and a round sort of hat. He came walking pretty fast from Marbeach way and turned up Mill Lane. And not long afterwards he came back again with what looked to me like a packet of picture postcards. He kept looking at them as he went along back towards Marbeach."

"What time was this?" Foxcroft asked.

"Well, I couldn't tell, exactly. I don't take much heed of time when I'm out to enjoy myself. But the sun was getting low. I reckon it must have been five or thereabouts when I saw the chap coming back. I started for home myself a few minutes after that."

Further questioning of Bert failed to elicit any additional information regarding the foxy-looking man, and after a while Foxcroft went on his way. His next call was on Mr. Plowman, who lived in the house which his father had built and called Mafeking, a name sufficiently indicating its date and style. Mr. Plowman had heard of Dr. Wiegler's death, and made no attempt to hide his satisfaction. "Dr. Wiegler made himself extremely offensive to me on more than one occasion," he said pompously. "He was an interferer and a busybody, and I see no reason why I or any one else should pretend to be

sorry for his death " But about what Bert Hawthorne have said to him on the previous afternoon Mr. Plowman not so positive He had come for his money, and Mr. Plowman had given it to him He had talked a good deal, as he usually did, and Mr Plowman had not paid much attention to what he had said He might have mentioned that he saw Dr. Wiegler walking through the village, or he might not. Mr. Plowman really couldn't remember.

By six o'clock that evening, when Foxcroft, obeying his instructions, rang up the sergeant his report was completed. Bob Tipping had been able to confirm Bert's statement that Dr Wiegler had passed him in the village, walking rapidly in the direction of Mill Lane Mrs Forbes remembered seeing Bert sitting in his chair by the roadside as she was riding to Marbeach about three o'clock and exchanging a word with him The spot where Bert had established himself commanded the entrance to Mill Lane It was practically impossible for any-one to have gone up the lane unobserved by Bert Remained the foxy-looking man with his mysterious picture-postcards.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE INQUEST was held on the morning of Tuesday, November 16th, and was entirely lacking in sensations All the witnesses agreed that the position of the body was such that it must have fallen from the edge of the pit Sergeant Briston, who had visited the spot in person for the second time, described how the loose soil at the edge had broken away at a point exactly above the spot where the body had been found Dr Woodcock swore that the injuries were exactly what he would have expected to find on the body of a man who had stepped over a cliff and fallen face downwards on to stony ground beneath

The jury were quite prepared to accept this weight of evidence. It was composed of residents of Exton Forcett, with Mr Saunders, who kept the village shop, as their foreman. The members were fairly representative of local opinion, which had crystallised during the past few days Dr. Wiegler had been definitely disliked, and his removal from the scene seemed to most people an act of providence. Who were they to question the means which providence had employed? Every one who had seen the body, from the squire to Tom Docking, was

that it must have fallen into the pit. So the jury returned to return a verdict in accordance with the evidence.

Accidental Death.

That same morning Leonard Corringham received an urgent telegram recalling him to his duties at the Admiralty, and left forthwith. But, at Sir Mark's urgent request, Merrion stayed on at Exton House, as his leave did not expire till Thursday. And on the Tuesday evening he and his host sat alone together in the library.

They were in semi-darkness, for Corringham was very conscientious in the matter of fuel. Only a single electric lamp of low candle power was burning in the room, and this, with the glow from the logs in the grate gave a light in which objects appeared vague and unreal. The two arm-chairs drawn up before the fire seemed vast, enveloping the men reclining in them. For a long while neither spoke, but both were convinced of a certain tension in the air. Until at last Corringham bent forward, picked up the poker and turned over one of the logs. A pale flame shot up, giving his face an unearthly pallor.

"I'm glad you were able to stay, Merrion," he said abruptly. "I wanted your opinion upon all this. You don't live here, so you can look at things from a quite unbiased point of view. And I'm going to make you my father confessor, for, to be quite candid, my conscience isn't at all clear. I may have used my influence in the wrong direction."

"We most of us do that more than once in our lives," Merrion replied quietly. "You mean that your evidence may have influenced the jury this morning?"

"Not only the jury. Look here, Merrion, you live in a place which from your account is not unlike this, and you can therefore understand my position. All the folk here call me squire, and it's not by any means a formal title, I assure you. Rightly or wrongly, they look up to me as a person who has more experience of worldly affairs than they have, and most of them are prepared to accept what I say. Added to that, I am a justice of the peace, an appointment which is bound to carry a certain amount of weight.

"Don't think that I'm harping on my own importance. I'm only trying to tell you why it is that my experience is apt to be accepted by others as an escape from their own personal responsibility. Squire said so and he ought to know, implying that Squire's dictum relieved them of the necessity of thinking for themselves. I wonder if you understand what I

"I understand perfectly," Merrion replied from the of his arm-chair.

"Then you will understand why my conscience is Last Sunday morning, in this very room, I expressed an opinion as to how Dr. Wiegler met his death. It was a perfectly genuine opinion, for at the time I gave it I believed that was how things had happened. Unfortunately it seems to have been accepted by the police as gospel. I wonder now whether, if I had not expressed myself so positively, a more searching inquiry would not have been made into the affair."

"You have your doubts about the correctness of the verdict?" Merrion asked.

"I reply under the seal of confession. I am not satisfied in my own mind that Wiegler's death was accidental. You, a stranger, if I may use the term, saw as much as I did. And I should very greatly value your candid opinion."

Merrion did not reply immediately. He picked up a splinter of wood from the fender, held it to the smouldering logs until it burst into flame, and with it lighted a cigarette. The flame revealed a stern look in his eyes. "My candid opinion?" he said, as he threw away the splinter after a few puffs at his cigarette. "You are welcome to it. I have never had the slightest doubt that Wiegler was the victim of foul play. He was, in fact, deliberately murdered."

"Ah!" Corringham exclaimed, in a low and strained voice. "You would not say that unless you knew something."

"I know nothing but what my own eyes have told me," Merrion replied. "My duties have taught me the importance of details, and of the deductions that may often be drawn from them. On Sunday morning I saw no more than any of you might have seen. But the central fact of the body lying on the stones, blinded you to minor facts, even more significant."

"I saw nothing whatever to suggest violence," said Corringham. "What were these minor facts you speak of?"

"Shall I tell you how the various details struck me?" Merrion replied. "You will remember that on Sunday morning I came downstairs to the hall while Tom Docking was telling you his story. He was a trifle incoherent, as might be expected of a man in the position he found himself in. He kept repeating that he had found the doctor lying in the pit face downwards with his head all bashed in."

"This struck me as rather odd. Tom was emphatic that he had not moved the body, or even touched it. According to him, the body was lying in the pit, face downwards. If it had

from that way, one would have expected the injuries to be frontal. How had Tom, without lifting the head from the ground, seen that it was all bashed in?

"Then we all went to the spot in a body, and I saw the answer to this question. There were extensive frontal injuries, certainly. But, even before the body was turned over, we could see that the head was so badly injured as to justify Tom's expression. And these injuries were at the back of the head, and slightly to the right.

"Now, let's consider the accepted theory. Wiegler had been bird-watching from some point near the edge of the pit. When it became too dark for him to see any longer, he gave up watching, took a step or two forward, and got too near the edge, which gave way beneath his weight, precipitating him on to the stones beneath. There was nothing about the central fact, the position in which the body was found, that did not conform to this theory. But there were several minor facts which directly contradicted it."

"You will believe me, I hope, when I assure you that I saw none of them," said Corringham.

"Most certainly I believe you," Merrion replied. "But perhaps, when I explain what these facts were, you will prefer to say that you saw them without observing them. Now, as you know very well, I have heard a good deal about Dr. Wiegler since I have been here. For the last couple of days he has been the principal topic of conversation. I am quite prepared to accept his unpopularity. But I very much doubt his activities as an enemy agent.

"My view is that he was genuinely interested in ornithology and that he occupied himself on Saturday afternoon by watching the birds on the Brooks from some point of view on the skirt of Gallows Wood. But I cannot accept the theory that he had given up watching when he met his death. His first action on ceasing to look through his binoculars would be to return them to their case. They were a valuable pair of Zeiss glasses, and Wiegler would have taken every care of them. But they had not been returned to their case. There can be no question that they were, and that they fell out during the fall, for the case was securely fastened.

"Now we come to another point. As you know, I went up to look at the spot from which Wiegler had fallen. And there I noted three facts. The surface of the ground under the trees of Gallows Wood is covered with pine-needles. Between the wood and the edge of the pit, an average distance of ten yards,

as a strip of clean and closely-cropped grass. This strip towards the pit, so that an equally good view over the can be obtained from the skirt of the wood as from the edge of the pit.

"I don't claim any profound knowledge of bird-watching but I do know that the first instinct of the watcher must be to conceal himself. Wiegler would never have stood out in the open, near the pit, where in his dark coat he would have been about as conspicuous as a lighthouse. He would have stood right back against the trees, where he would have been with their dark trunks. And that he actually did so is shown out by the evidence of the pine-needles.

"No doubt you saw them, without realising their significance. When the body was turned over, two of them were sticking in the front of his overcoat. They might have lodged there as he stood under the trees. But there was a third, lodged between his collar and the skin of his throat. I suppose it might have fallen into that position as he stood or sat watching. But I utterly refuse to believe that any man, however intent upon what he was looking at, would have allowed it to remain there. The irritation would be too great. Try it for yourself if you don't believe me. Finally, one of the buttons of his overcoat was almost torn off, and hung by a thread.

"It seems to me that these facts admit of only one interpretation. Wiegler was standing or sitting—standing, I think, just inside the wood, with his binoculars in his hand, possibly held up to his eyes. Somebody crept up behind him—no difficulty there, for the pine-needles under the trees form a soft and noiseless carpet—and hit him on the back of his head with the hackneyed blunt weapon. Wiegler fell forward, either stunned or killed outright. His assailant dragged the body down the slope, as it was, head first. In this process the pine-needles got lodged where we found them. They didn't fall, but were picked up from the ground. The coat button was also torn nearly off. When he had dragged the body near enough to the pit, the assailant pushed it over, and part of the loose soil at the edge went with it."

Merrion came to an end, and for a while there was silence, broken at last by Corringham. "That's rather horrifying," he said. "I can see every detail as you describe it. I've had a sort of shadow of the idea at the back of my mind, but I've refused to face it. If you're right, what are we going to do about it?"

"That's for you to say. It's no affair of mine whatever. I'm

an interested spectator. But if you take my advice, do nothing. A coroner's jury, seven good men and women and true, have determined that Wiegler's death was accidental. Leave it at that, and let my own private opinion remain a secret between us."

"I'm very much relieved to hear you say that," said Corrington gratefully. "I don't want to start making inquiries which might end by implicating any of my friends. Don't jump to the conclusion that I'm ready to condone murder. In any other case I should feel bound to take action on what you have told me. But, if Wiegler was indeed murdered, I think it very probable that the man who killed him honestly believed that he had every justification for doing so. An act of war rather than of private vengeance."

"You have your suspicions?" Merrion asked.

"Suspicions? I'd rather not put it as strongly as that. But we've had uncomfortable thoughts this last couple of days. As you say, we've all talked about little else but Wiegler since Sunday morning. And you must have gathered that if ever there was a likely candidate for murder, he was one—Hermione tells me that at lunch on Saturday, only a few hours before his death, he was talking wildly. He had warned Plowman that on Monday he was going to take up with the council the matter of that confounded shelter. He was going to expose, a favourite phrase of his, somebody else unnamed. That morning he had had a violent altercation with Mrs Burwash."

"These are only examples of what I mean. In addition, you've got to remember that he was, and is, popularly suspected of being a spy. That's the general picture, but there were more intimate additions. Wiegler had driven Hermione Cecil to such a degree of distraction that she was very near the end of her tether. The tension at Foursquare was very near the breaking point."

"Had your uncomfortable thoughts turned in the direction of Mrs Cecil?" Merrion asked.

"Indirectly, yes. I know that Hermione had unburdened her soul to young Roland, and had enlarged upon the popular conviction that Wiegler was a spy. Roland had promised her to keep his eye on the man while he was at home. Now, you'll recall what happened while we were out shooting on Saturday afternoon. We had no beaters, for there's no manpower to spare for that sort of thing nowadays. After Leonard had had to give up, the party split. I asked Roland to go up towards Gallows Wood, to the far end of the field between

the wood and the park, while you and I took up our about a mile away, in the opposite direction. The idea that at an agreed time, four o'clock, we should start slowly towards one another, each party beating the towards the other."

"Yes, that's what we did," Merrion agreed. "I think I what's in your mind. A revised version of the Chanson Roland, in which the traitor Ganelon is slain by the hero."

"Something of the kind," Corringham replied. "And after your reconstruction of the crime, I see how it might been possible. Roland, instead of starting from the end of field, went a little way into the wood. And there, at farther side, he saw the man his mother had denounced him, staring out over the countryside through his binc. A blow on the back of the head with the stock of his. I don't know. I don't want to think about it."

"I don't think you need," said Merrion. "After the v this morning the police won't take any further action. And gather that Wiegler's relatives, if he has any, haven't so taken any interest in his fate. Does Mrs. Cecil know any about them?"

"Nothing whatever. All that Wiegler ever said about family was that he was an only child, and that his fa and mother were both dead. Wiegler told me, a week his death, that he was in no way dependent upon the fees earned here, as he had a very comfortable nest-egg put awa. Who he may have left that to, we don't know. I've ad Hermione to put the matter in the hands of a friend of mine, who's a solicitor in Marbeach. He'll do whatever's necessary in the way of advertisement, and so forth."

"That's the best thing to be done," said Merrion. "I shouldn't let that idea about Roland worry you. It's only one possibility, and there are dozens of others. To use your own expression Wiegler was a most likely candidate for murder. Personally, I'm always inclined to look first for a money motive. Men are more often killed for financial reasons than because their behaviour is exasperating or they are suspected of espionage. But, for the present at all events, let's forget the conversation we've had this evening, and thankfully accept the jury's verdict. There's no sense in stirring up muddy water once it's been allowed to settle."

At Exton House the incident might be regarded as closed. But elsewhere in the village it remained a subject of guarded discussion for a long time afterwards. Guarded, because so

people were uncomfortably aware that they had said things about Dr. Wiegler which might be taken as sinister threats. You couldn't question the verdict of a coroner's jury. But Wiegler's death had been accidental, and Providence so often acts through human agency.

Not that any accusations were made. Whatever suspicions people might have of their neighbours, they kept them strictly to themselves. But they couldn't be expected not to discuss what had happened, with the strict stipulation that no names were to be mentioned. In the White Bull, for instance, when there were no inquisitive people present. Since the beginning of the war a poster, now rather fly-blown, had hung on the wall of the back room of the White Bull. "Careless talk costs lives" it was headed. And some of the customers were dimly aware that the familiar slogan had required a new and local application.

In this room, on the Wednesday morning following the request, a handful of the older men of the village had gathered. It had a wide doorway opening upon the yard of the inn, and through this, with a little pulling and pushing, Bert Hawthorne's wheel-chair could be introduced. It was getting too cold for sitting on the bench outside. And this morning the chair, with Bert in it, had been drawn up before the fire. Flanking it on either side were his cronies. Old Isaac Sambourne, the father of Fred, who had fallen through the ladder, a little wizened husk of a man, by name Andy Sherwood, who had at one time been cowman at Exton House home farm, but was now pensioned off. Jim Leader, a retired road foreman, and a couple more.

It was very snug in the back room, with a good fire burning. And one could freely express one's views, for both doors were shut, the one leading into the yard and the other into the bar. And as Isaac Sambourne put down his mug after a long draught he shook his head solemnly. "It doesn't do to ask too many questions," he said.

"You're right there, Isaac," Sherwood agreed in a squeaky voice. "There be some as knows a sight more than we do. Folks high up. And they know what's best done, these times."

"It isn't always only the folks high up that knows," said Bert Hawthorne from the depths of his chair. "There's others that knows a thing or two. But it doesn't always do to say so."

The truth was that the foxey-looking man had never

appeared in the picture Foxcroft had duly repeated statement to the sergeant, who had dismissed it as bearing on the matter. Sergeant Briston had been convincing himself that Wiegler's death had been a His eyes had seen no suggestion of foul play, and he from experience the utter unreliability of village The dead man might have been a spy, but there absolutely no evidence to go upon He had undoubtedly unpopular, but if the police were to assume murder time an unpopular man died, their time would be occupied. As for the foxy-looking man it was quite likely Bert, dozing in his chair in the sun, had dreamt the incident The sergeant had made a few inquiries, but else had seen any such person Even if he had existed, was no earthly reason to suppose he had anything to do the case Was it to be supposed that he had walked up Lane, pushed the doctor over the edge of the pit, and back again, looking through a packet of picture postcards The idea was ridiculous, and the best thing Foxcroft could was to forget all about it.

But there was no mistaking the mysterious significance Bert's tone. "What, you know something, do you, Bert?" Jim Leader asked derisively "What might that be?"

"Ah!" Bert replied "Now you're asking me so I've told it once to the police and they took no notice I'm telling it again. I don't want to get into no trouble"

"The police!" Sambourne exclaimed contemptuously. "I don't take any heed of them Why, they didn't think to what Tom Docking was doing down along the Brooks at o'clock on Sunday morning And there's no police here to listen Come along, Bert, and tell us what you know. We won't get you into no trouble, you know that"

Bert allowed himself to be persuaded into repeating the story of the foxy-looking man But in the interval his imagination must have been at work, for his account was now considerably embroidered "He was wearing a queer-shaped sort of round hat, and he'd got it pushed back on his head so that he showed a tuft of red hair in front And I thought to myself that the chap must be a foreigner. A Scotsman maybe."

A thrilled murmur arose from his audience at this Any one so alien to Exton Forcett as a Scotsman would of course be capable of anything But Bert's chamber of horrors was not yet exhausted. "Or even maybe an Irishman," he continued.

of those chaps that spend their time going around sniffing decent folk."

He wouldn't have shot up Dr. Wiegler, then," Andy Berwood squeaked. "He——"

"I'm not saying that he did," Bert interrupted, "I'm saying that I didn't like the look of him. And when I saw him turn up Mill Lane I knew he must be up to something or other. What did he want up there, that's what I said to myself. There's nothing up there, since the old mill's been pulled down. I wasn't to know that the doctor had gone up that way to the pit. I'd have followed the chap if I'd been able, just to see what he was about. But I couldn't have pushed the old chair up the lane, it's too rough and steep for that. Let alone through the trees of Gallows Wood."

"It's lucky you didn't try to go after him, Bert," Sambourne remarked. "He might have pushed you over the pit, chair and all, and then where would you have been?"

"I'd have chanced that," Bert replied stoutly. "But I couldn't, so there it was. I just sat there, wondering wherever the chap could have got to. And then, sure enough, I saw him come back down the lane, and a terrible hurry he was in. Never so much as looked at me as he passed. But he had those postcards, if they was postcards, in his hand, and every now and then he'd pick one of them out and stare at it, sort of smiling like."

Jim Leader shook his head mistrustfully. "It doesn't sound all square and above board to me," he said. "Where did he get those postcards from, do you reckon?"

"Ah, that's just it," Bert replied. "Were they postcards, after all? They seemed like it, sure enough, but I couldn't see them close. Suppose they were snapshots that Dr. Wiegler had taken?"

"Snapshots!" Sambourne exclaimed. "Why, what would the doctor have taken snapshots of?"

"Military objectives," Bert replied in a hushed voice. "The searchlight post along the road, maybe. And when he'd taken them, he'd want to pass them on to a foreigner, wouldn't he? This other chap knew where he was and went to meet him, you may be sure of that."

This triumphant logic admitted of no argument. In a flash the whole machinery of espionage was revealed to Bert's awestruck audience. The procedure was perfectly obvious. Dr. Wiegler under cover of his visits to his patients, had taken photographs of military objectives. Having appointed a

rendezvous with the red-haired foreigner, he had them to his care. The foreigner of course had direct to Hitler. It was perfectly obvious, now that penetrated the secret

There was a hushed silence, while the group sinister possibilities. Until Andy Sherwood spoke, his voice raised just above a whisper. "Then this other chap Bert saw pushed the doctor over the edge when he'd got he wanted from him?"

Jim Leader laughed, shortly and contemptuously. "what's come over you, Andy?" he replied "You must daft. What would he want to do a thing like that for? want the doctor to keep on and take some more wouldn't he? That's only sense."

"Then, when all's said and done, it was an accident Sambourne asked, in a tone of evident disappointment.

Jim Leader's lip curled. "You can call it an accident if like. There's accidents and accidents. And I tell you think Our Secret Service blokes are a lot wider awake some of us believe. How if they know all the time what's going on here? They know their stuff all right, though they don't talk about it. And it'll be best for us if we either."

CHAPTER FIVE

HERMIONE CECIL was certainly not troubled by misgivings as to the cause of the Wiegler's man's death. Her principal reaction to the event was a profound relief at the removal from her path of a particularly obnoxious personality. Much as if a spider had been extricated from the bath, in fact. It was pleasant to feel that she was relieved from a constant annoyance

The disposal of his personal effects she willingly left to Sir Mark's solicitor friend, who promised to make the necessary inquiries. The expenses of the funeral would be paid out of the share of fees due to the Wiegler man as locum. It was the matter of replacing him which caused Hermione more concern.

Dr Woodcock and his partner Dr. Blesborough had been very good. They had undertaken to nurse the practice between them. One or other of them would come over every evening during the usual surgery hours. But they had warned

that this arrangement must be regarded as only temporary, their own practice fully occupied their time. Dr. Woodcock particularly impressed upon her the necessity of finding another locum with the least possible delay.

Roland's leave had expired and Hermione was left alone to deal with the situation. Never very capable in the face of an unexpected emergency she felt this was utterly beyond her. The obvious course was to apply to the agency with which her husband had already had dealings. But this idea appalled her. They might send another Wiegler man and that would be so awful. Hermione, worried to death by such a disturbing possibility, tried to picture to herself the ideal locum, if such a paragon existed. He would be old, white-haired and benevolent, the family doctor of tradition. He would be content with old and well-tried remedies, and would not attempt any psychological rubbish with his humbler patients. He would have a kind and reassuring manner. There would be no suspicion of any nonsense with Miss Draper. More than all, he would confine himself to the practice of medicine, and refrain from busying himself with the concerns of others.

It must not be supposed that Hermione visualised this picture as a whole. She was not that sort of person. Things occurred to her only in disconnected snatches. Her conception of the perfect locum was built up item by item in the intervals of a frantic cable correspondence with St John Cecil, who was fortunately on the staff of a base hospital, and therefore within comparatively easy reach. This correspondence need not be quoted in full. Hermione's first cable to her husband is typical of the rest. "Wiegler dead another locum urgent you must do something." St John's final cable, which arrived ten-days after Wiegler's death was, "Have arranged with Dr Mountwell, who will contact you direct."

This, of course, was a great relief. St John had actually done something, which was unlike him. His usual method of dealing with an unexpected situation was to adopt an attitude of masterly inactivity. He often said that he had saved the lives of many of his patients by letting nature take her own course. Hermione had been afraid that he would merely instruct the agency to send another man to replace Wiegler. A stranger who, though he could not possibly be worse, might in other ways be almost as bad. But St John had actually bestirred himself and found somebody by his own efforts.

Hermione kept repeating to herself the words of the cable. "Have arranged with Dr Mountwell." The sentence had a

comforting ring about it. St. John, away in the Middle couldn't possibly have arranged by cable with didn't know. He must have met this Dr Mountwell he went abroad. That was quite likely, for St. John was sociable disposition and liked to meet people, especially his own profession. Perhaps they had even been together, in which case Dr Mountwell would be a man St. John's own age. Rather younger than Hermione pictured, for her husband was only forty-seven. But that wouldn't matter. He would never have arranged someone he couldn't trust. The position of a locum was one some delicacy. He must live in the house, which was by his absent friend's wife and secretary-dispenser. Of medical etiquette was terribly strict in such matters, still . . . St. John must surely realise the situation, didn't he? St. John very rarely troubled to look beneath surface of things.

It was at least reassuring that the name sounded enough with no foreign associations attaching to it racked her brains, but could not remember having heard before. And that was rather curious, for St. John usually talked about his friends in her presence. Further, most of them had come to stay at Foursquare at one time or another. Perhaps Dr Mountwell was one of the people he used to meet when he went up to London on professional business, as he frequently did in peace-time. For the purpose of attending important medical conferences, he told her. It was devoutly to be hoped that Dr Mountwell was the sort of person who would go down well at Exton House and at the Rectory. The social situation of a doctor made such a difference. Besides, the panel patients never had any real confidence in their own class. Had St. John thought of all these things?

Thus Hermione, during the couple of days which elapsed after the arrival of her husband's cable. And then came a telegram despatched from London, S W 1, and addressed to Mrs Cecil, Foursquare, Exton Forcett. "Can take up duties to-morrow arriving Marbeach 4 17 p.m. Hope this convenient to you, Mountwell."

The telegram arrived just as Hermione was starting for Exton House where she had been invited to tea. She took it with her, and in a flutter of excitement showed it to Sir Mark and Lady Corringham. "Isn't it splendid?" she exclaimed. "I never expected we should be able to get someone so soon. But I've got everything ready. The Wiegler

"The room has been thoroughly spring-cleaned, and I've packed up all his things and put them away. I do hope someone will claim them soon. I don't at all like having them in the house. And when Dr. Woodcock comes over this evening, I shall be able to tell him it's for the last time. He and Blesborough have been terribly good, but I know they'll be glad not to have to come any more. I do hope they'll get on well with Dr. Mountwell. And I shall have to arrange for a car to meet him at Marbeach Station to-morrow afternoon."

"Mark has to go into Marbeach to-morrow," said Lady Corringham. "I dare say he would bring Dr. Mountwell back. Could you, Mark?"

"I don't see any difficulty about that," Corringham replied. "I've got to attend a meeting of the Rural District Council at half-past two, but it will be over by four. If you like to come with me, Hermione, you can spend your time buying things you can do without, and meet me at the station soon after four. I'll take the big car so that we can bring back the doctor and his luggage. How would you like that?"

"It would be too marvellous," Hermione exclaimed. "That's really sweet of you, Mark. It will be so much nicer to meet Dr. Mountwell at the station than to send a car for him. Besides you know what Watson's taxi is like. I'm never quite sure that it isn't going to break down. And it would be too terribly awkward if that happened with somebody we've never met. Dr. Mountwell must be an old friend of St. John's, though I don't ever remember hearing him talk about him. He must have met him at his conferences in London, I suppose."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Corringham gravely, but with difficulty suppressing a smile. He knew very well that St. John's visits to London were more often for the purposes of convivial foregatherings than for important medical conferences. "That's settled, then. I'll call for you soon after two o'clock to-morrow, and we'll meet this new locum of yours."

Corringham returned to the subject after Hermione had gone home. "I wonder what sort of a fellow St. John has foisted on his wretched wife this time?" he said, as he and Sylvia Corringham were sitting together over the drawing-room fire. "Or for that matter, how from where he is he managed to find anybody at all. Hermione's right, I fancy. It must be somebody he knows and has kept in touch with. I'm quite looking forward to meeting him to-morrow."

Lady Corringham looked at him questioningly. "I you know something about the man," she said

"I don't, I promise you," her husband replied. "But know what St John is Last time he wouldn't trouble to for a man till it was just too late to pick and choose and he to take the first that came along. And now I don't betting he's taken the line of least resistance. This Mountwell is quite likely to be some hard case who can't a practice of his own It would be just like St. John to do a chap like that a good turn so long as it put him to no personal inconvenience. He's generous enough in a selfish way if you know what I mean"

"I think you're being very unjust to St John," said Lady Corringham indignantly.

Corringham laughed "You've always stuck up for him, ever since he was a spirited and pampered youth But you must admit that there's something to be said for Hermione's side of the question, foolish as she may be at times Look at it purely from the material point of view She's never considered in any way, and yet it's her money which has been used to keep the house and all St. John's little extravagancies for a long time now. The practice hasn't brought in a lot, you may be sure of that. And if things go on as they have been going, there won't be much practice left by the time St. John comes home."

"That was entirely Dr. Wiegler's fault This new man will probably pull it together again. If he doesn't, St. John will when the war is over Everybody likes him, as you know very well You do yourself, although you seem bent on taking his character away"

"I do like him, and I'm not taking his character away. You and I know that he's thoroughly popular and at the same time hopelessly inefficient Do you suppose that if anything was the matter with you I should rest content with St John's diagnosis? Whatever Wiegler's faults may have been, I should very much rather trust him And I don't doubt Hermione has an inkling of the truth That's why Wiegler's insinuations of her husband's blundering infuriated her so No, it's not St. John's character but his judgment that I'm doubtful of"

"He can't have chosen anybody worse than Wiegler. And he didn't choose him, if it comes to that."

"He didn't actually choose him, certainly. But he left things so late that he had to take him on, whether he liked it or not And you must admit that, from the medical point of

"He may have chosen much worse this time. We neither liked Wiegler and if he had lived much longer Hermione would have had a nervous breakdown. But, all the same, he was a brilliant doctor. You can't deny that several of St. John's patients have been different men and women since Wiegler treated them."

"I dare say. But what's the good of being a brilliant doctor if patients dislike you so much that they go to somebody else? I don't see that it matters whether this new man is particularly brilliant or not, so long as he has the knack of making people like him."

"Including Hermione. That's the trouble. I suppose the locum has got to lodge at the regular doctor's house, but it must create an impossible situation sometimes. It wouldn't matter for a month or two, but St. John's locum has got to take his place until the end of the war, or until St. John's demobilised, which may be much later."

"Hermione won't mind the new locum as long as he knows how to behave."

"But will he? What, for instance, if he begins by treating Eileen Draper as a human being? That would be enough to set Hermione up in arms. And have you ever thought of the other way round? It's more than possible that Hermione may get on the new broom's nerves."

"What's the matter with you this evening, Mark?" Lady Corringham exclaimed. "First of all you say ungenerous things about St. John and now you're suggesting that Hermione gets on people's nerves. And you've known them both as long as I have."

Corringham laughed. "Longer, in the case of St. John, for I remember the day he was born. His proud father drove on his rounds in his high dog-cart with a huge blue bow in his buttonhole that day. And it's just because I've known them both so long that I'm being quite frank about them for once. After all, they usually come round here with their troubles in the end. And it's as well that we should be prepared for them. I somehow can't see peace and harmony reigning at Foursquare with any locum installed there."

"It won't be Hermione's fault if they don't. She's not one to start a quarrel. She wouldn't have objected to Wiegler if he hadn't been quite impossible, as he most certainly was."

"No, she won't start a quarrel. But don't you see how exasperating she must be to any one in the peculiar position of a locum? By this time Hermione must know St. John's faults

better than any one. She must have seen that the affection he shows her is only a screen, and that all he cares for are his own comforts and amusements. She has a pretty shrewd idea that his diagnosis is mostly work, and his treatment the one which will give him the trouble. And her natural reaction is to hide all this from people. Every one must understand that St. John is not the perfect husband but also the perfect doctor. Any done differently from the way he would have done it necessarily be wrong, and the doctor is made to understand. Not in so many words, of course. But by that gentle air of disapproval with which she knows so well how to herself. It would get on my nerves if I had to put up with it day in and day out. I shouldn't wonder if Wiegler's of St. John weren't made in sheer self-defence."

"I suppose you can't help looking at things from masculine point of view," said Lady Corringham, getting up from her chair. "I know very well that Hermione did her best to make Dr. Wiegler comfortable, however much she disliked him. And I'm sure she'll do the same for this now. In my opinion he's lucky to have a house like that to go to. I must go and write a couple of letters before dinner."

Corringham, left alone, allowed his thoughts to dwell on the subject of the new locum. He was genuinely fond of both St. John and Hermione and had for long been distressed at the situation at Foursquare. He knew well enough that St. John had not joined up from purely patriotic motives. St. John had made that perfectly clear in one of his confidences on the eve of his departure. "I've been married to Hermione for twenty-seven years now," he had said, "and all that time I've lived at Foursquare with her. The daily round, the common task! Heavens, how sick I am of it all. Nobody could want a better wife than Hermione, bless her, but living with her isn't altogether an exhilarating experience. I know I've managed to escape now and then for a day or two at a time, but that's not enough. This is my chance to be on my own for a while, and to see something of the world beyond Exton Forcett. Give me my freedom for a spell while I'm still not too old to enjoy it. I shall settle down again when I come back, you needn't worry about that."

So he had gone, without giving overmuch thought to Hermione's feelings. He had never troubled to wonder how she would enjoy being saddled with a permanent lodger, whom she could not displace. He had left her cheerfully enough with the

man who came along. Was it likely that he had considered when he had made arrangements for his new man to come? Corringham knew well enough that some of St. John's friends were pretty doubtful folk.

But in the end Corringham's thoughts returned to Wiegler and to the manner of his death. He had told Merrion that his conscience had pricked him and that same conscience still refused to leave him in peace. Merrion's reconstruction of the incident had been so convincing that it was very difficult to evade. And if he could not escape from Merrion's conclusions, what was his own position? He, a magistrate, was deliberately concealing the fact that murder had been committed.

Of course, it was easy enough to adduce reasons justifying his silence. Merrion might have been mistaken in his interpretation of what he had observed. His theory rested upon insignificant details, pine-needles, coat-buttons, and so forth, which nobody but he had noticed. There had been no tangible evidence of foul play, no signs of a struggle, or anything like that. In any case it was far too late now to go to the police with a fantastic story of murder. They would ask for proof, and such slender proof as had existed at the time had been destroyed by now. Even if they took action, what chance had they of identifying a murderer who had left no single clue behind him?

All this was reasonable enough, and Corringham knew in his heart that it did not constitute the true reason for his silence. Without admitting it, even to himself, he felt an inner conviction that Merrion was right. Wiegler had been murdered, and morally it was his duty to put the hounds of justice on to the track of his murderer.

But, in spite of the uneasy stirrings of his conscience, he had no intention of doing anything of the kind. If any one had ever qualified for murder, Wiegler had been that man. His presence in the village had stirred up strife, and produced an atmosphere of envy, malice and all uncharitableness. He had, in spite of his undoubted professional ability, damaged St. John's practice, probably beyond repair. He had made Hermione's life a burden to her. He was popularly believed to have been, if not an actual enemy agent, at least a potential fifth columnist. Let sleeping dogs lie, or rather let murdered locums rest in their graves.

Even now, the true reason had not been touched upon. Corringham dreaded what an investigation might reveal. It was true that the possible motives behind Wiegler's murder

were bewildering in their variety. His death had very opportune moment for Plowman, for instance, had told him that he meant to bring the matter of the shelter to the notice of the chairman of the council following Monday, and he would undoubtedly have kept word. Had he done so, Plowman could scarcely have a prosecution, with probably a term of imprisonment as sequel. And who could tell how many others besides Wiegler had threatened with exposure for some fancied or otherwise?

But Corringham believed that the real murderer had motives than any of these. The situation at Fc become intolerable. It might be true enough that had made mountains out of molehills, had for instance fied Wiegler's slighting allusions to her husband's methods deadly and unpardonable insults. It might be true Wiegler's denunciations and interferences had been for Hermione's own good. That had only made them all more exasperating. The fact remained that she had the stage where she hated the man with every fibre of being.

It was not to be supposed that Hermione, inspired by had knocked Wiegler on the head and then dragged his over the edge of the gravel pit. It was doubtful whether was physically capable of such an action. And it was more doubtful whether, if guilty of such a crime, she have been able to maintain the pose of serene detachment, which she had exhibited since the event. Her attitude that, apart from being a blessed relief, Wiegler's death was no concern of hers. No, Hermione was not the stuff of which murderers were made. But her indictment of Wiegler might well have inspired another hand. And there, in spite of the stirrings of his conscience, Corringham was prepared to leave it.

On the following afternoon he took out the big Daimler, and with a careful eye on the need for saving tyres and petrol, drove slowly through the village towards Foursquare. His chauffeur had been called up long ago, so that whenever he took out one of the cars, which he did only when necessity arose, he had to drive himself. As he passed through the village, many a hand was raised in friendly greeting. Foxcroft, conscious of the respect due to a magistrate, sprang to attention and saluted smartly. The rector, standing by the lychgate at the entrance to the churchyard, raised an arm with a gesture of benediction. Bert Hawthorne, propelling his chair

towards from the direction of the White Bull, let go one of Frank handles for a moment to touch the peak of his well-worn cap. Even Mrs Burwash, occupied as usual in her garden commanding a view of the road, shook her rake towards the squire as he passed by.

He found Hermione ready and waiting for him, which was a portent in itself. As a rule she was absolutely regular in her punctuality. You could count upon her being exactly five minutes late for meals or for any other appointment. It was not that she was heedless about time, but something that positively must be done always cropped up at the last moment. To-day she actually opened the front door herself as the car drove up. Corringham, noticing that she had put on her best clothes and a new hat, understood that going to meet the new locum was to her a real adventure.

She chattered away happily enough during the drive to Marbeach. Mark needn't think she would be bored while he was at his old meeting. She had lots of shopping to do in preparation for Dr. Mountwell's arrival. Men always liked plenty of pepper and she had just found that there wasn't a grain in the house. She had sent Mabel tearing round to the shop, but Mr. Saunders had run out, and wouldn't be having any more in before next week. And then there were the points rations to be thought of. She'd saved all her coupons for the month, and meant to use them now. She liked to give Mr. Saunders all the custom she could, but his choice of things you had to buy on points was always so terribly limited. She was going to Bullards in Marbeach. They always had a good stock of things. They might even have some nice biscuits. St. John always liked to have some biscuits handy in case he was called out at nights, so that he could eat one or two when he got home. And she was sure that Dr. Mountwell would be the same.

Corringham dropped his passenger outside Bullards shop in High Street and drove on to the council offices. He was a few minutes early and stopped for a word with Dr. Woodcock, who was there on some business with the sanitary inspector. Mrs. Cecil had told him that a new locum was coming to Foursquare this afternoon. He and his partner were very glad to hear that, for they were both run off their feet in Marbeach, without one of them having to go over to Exton Forcett every evening. Mrs. Cecil had told him the name, but he had forgotten it. Mountwell? Yes, that was it. One might hope that he would turn out to be a more reasonable sort of chap than Wiegler.

Nobody had been able to get along with him, clever though he was. He couldn't himself, for one. Well, he be running along, for he wanted to catch the sanitary in. before the meeting began.

Corringham went on into the council chamber, where of the members, male and female, were already standing groups. He exchanged a few words with some of them, topics being the weather and the nuisance of having to meetings when there were so many other things to be done. The chairman, a brisk and businesslike person, came in took his seat at the head of the long table running down centre of the room. "Shall we get down to it?" he said.

The clerk, armed with a mass of books and papers, himself at the chairman's right hand. The various council officials ranged themselves against the wall. The sat down in two rows, one on either side of the table, and proceedings began by the clerk reading the first item on the agenda. The purchase of land at Slofield-by-Midden for the purpose of extending the existing burial ground.

After a discussion as to the necessity for this, in which member representing Slofield-by-Midden expressed the pessimistic view that if any of the inhabitants died as things were now, he would have to be cremated, as there was no room to bury the body, it was agreed that the clerk should approach the owner of the land. The next items were dealt with rapidly, for every one present wanted to get home again before the black-out. Finally, the officials were asked if had anything to report.

The surveyor stood up, and with a glance at C. said that he would like to mention the matter of the air-shelter recently erected at Exton Forcett. There had been slight misunderstanding over certain technical details. C. to a misreading of the specifications, the contractor had carried out portions of the work exactly as therein laid down. His attention had been called to the matter, and he undertaken that the mistake should be rectified without delay. Corringham, asked by the chairman if he had any observation to make, said that he agreed with the surveyor that this course should be taken, and the matter was settled accordingly.

A few more points having been dealt with, the meeting to an end a few minutes before four o'clock. drove to the station, and almost as soon as he arrived there, Hermione appeared. She had taken two shopping bags with her, and these were now loaded to capacity. "It's been one

about the place. Haven't you ever noticed her uncompromising attitude towards poor little Eileen Draper?"

"Of course I have, but this girl's quite different. All I can say is that Hermione seems mighty difficult to please. What does she expect? Wiegler comes along and she can't tolerate him. I didn't blame her overmuch for that, for Wiegler was just about as difficult to handle as a full-grown hedgehog. But here, to take his place, is a charming and accomplished woman, with none of the stiffness one expects from females who take up a profession. And it seems to me that Hermione is showing every sign of developing a violent dislike for her. It simply isn't rational."

"It may not be rational, but it's Hermione," Lady Corringham replied. "I'm very much afraid that trouble will break out again in the Foursquare household before long. I can't help wondering what will happen next time Roland comes home on leave."

The panel patients, or at least the majority of them, having recovered from the first shock of attending the surgery and finding a woman in charge there, were thrilled by Alida Mountwell's advent. To have one's heart and lungs sounded by a young and pretty lady was an entirely novel adventure, as new as the experience of being coaxed instead of bullied. Slowly but surely the malcontents who had drifted away during the Wiegler regime drifted back again, reporting one to another that although the new doctor was a woman, she seemed to know pretty well what she was about.

Although she was a woman! Alida Mountwell's sex afforded grounds for criticism by the ultra conservative Exton Forcett had remained immune from the corrupting influence of feminism. Even the Women's Institute under the able guidance of Mrs. Laverock, had confined itself to domestic matters and remained aloof from local politics. It knitted comforts, it baked meat pies for farmworkers, it made jams of curious and hitherto unknown consistency. But none of its members had ever aspired to a seat on the parish council.

A lady doctor had then a certain amount of prejudice to surmount. Alida took the wise course of appearing completely unaware that this prejudice existed. And, except in a very few cases, she succeeded in making her patients realise that she was a doctor first and a woman merely incidentally. But there remained a few stubborn souls, mostly among the older folk, who refused to accept Alida's ministrations. The men said, with disconcerting frankness in matters of detail, that it

wouldn't be decent for a woman to tumble them about. women expressed, and probably genuinely felt, an utter lack of faith. Women were sent into this world to marry and bring up a family. What business had one of that sex to take up doctoring? It wasn't natural. And, anyhow, what could she know about it?

Sarah Hawthorne was one of the objectors, and, no doubt sensing Hermione's antipathy, unburdened herself one morning while they were turning out the dining-room together. "I wouldn't have Dr Mountwell in my house, no, that I wouldn't, Mum, and Bert he says the same. It isn't right for a woman to do the things a doctor has to. Besides, I wouldn't have any confidence in her, and nor wouldn't Bert neither."

"Dr. Mountwell has had exactly the same training as men do," Hermione replied rather weakly.

"That may be," said Sarah darkly. "But what good has it done her, that's what I'd like to know. Where were her eyes when she was being trained? Not on what she was being shown, I'll be bound. She'd be using them to ogle the young gentlemen students around her. I wouldn't trust her, not with a boil on my neck. Well, it's a long time since we've wanted a doctor in the house, touch wood. I'm strong and hearty enough, and so is Bert, apart from his legs. The doctor told him long ago that nothing could ever do them any good. I wish the doctor was back again, Mum. Things have never been the same since he went away."

"He'll come back some day," Hermione replied absently. Sarah had, quite unwittingly, put her finger upon her most sensitive spot. Hermione's creed, though she would never have admitted it, was very similar to Sarah Hawthorne's. She herself had done her duty as a woman. She had married St. John and had made him a comfortable home. She had brought up a son to be a credit to her and to serve his country at the hour of need. All the friends of her youth had preserved their femininity. They had obeyed the age-old precept that a woman's place is the home. Not one of them had deviated into occupations properly reserved for men.

It was therefore perhaps natural that she completely failed to understand Alida's outlook on life. That a woman might prefer a professional career to becoming a wife and mother was entirely beyond her comprehension. And, since she could not understand the simple fact she was driven to seek the motive hidden beneath the surface. And the only conclusion she could

come to was that Alida had chosen this career so that she might meet men.

And this, of course, covered an infinite possibility of intrigue. It was true that a predatory Delilah would find very little scope for her talents in Exton Forcett. But what raffish past might not be hidden behind that easy, capable manner of hers? How much did she and St. John know of one another? Surely the fact that she never mentioned his name pointed to the existence of some secret intimacy between them. It was disgraceful that St. John should have admitted a woman of that sort to the chastity of his home.

So Hermione drifted helplessly upon the unquiet sea of suspicion. She was far too proud to say a word on the subject to any one else, even to Sylvia Corringham, who might have laughed her out of her ridiculous fancies. Like a derelict she continued to drift, ever creating for herself fresh visions of infamy. Because Alida was cheerful and lighthearted, Hermione persuaded herself that she must be frivolous and shallow. Because she habitually faced life with a smile, she must therefore be hugging to herself who knew what disgraceful memories?

As may be imagined, life at Foursquare was formal and constrained under these conditions. Certainly Alida spent the greater part of her time beyond the baize door, or out in the village. Apart from her regular routine rounds, people were getting in the way of asking her to drop in for a cup of tea. People whom Hermione would never have dreamed of associating with socially. Alida had been known to spend an hour with the Plowmans at Mafeking, or with Mr. and Mrs. Saunders in their very comfortable parlour behind the shop, drinking tea and talking. And that puzzled Hermione above everything. What could she find to talk about?

Hermione, as usual, found a disturbing answer to her own puzzle. Alida must be a conspirator, an intrigante. What she might be conspiring, or against whom, Hermione had no idea. But it boded no good, of that she was quite certain. When she was not out she was in the surgery, even at hours when patients were not admitted. She could only be talking to Miss Draper, a manifest sign that her conspiracy had penetrated the defences of Foursquare itself.

Of course, no thought of conspiracy of any kind ever entered Alida's head. It was her belief that, as the doctor in a small place like Exton Forcett, it was her business to get to know her patients or potential patients. People responded more

easily to someone they were on good terms with than to a total stranger. Alida knew well enough that a certain reserve must exist on the part of countryfolk towards that unfamiliar phenomenon, a lady doctor. It was her policy to get over their initial shyness before she was called in professionally.

Among the very first people who had summoned her was Mrs. Burwash, who had an unfailing pretext for consulting doctors. She suffered from occasional recurrences of sprue, a tropical disease which she had acquired on the east coast of Africa, where her husband had been a government official of considerable eminence. She nursed no extravagant hope that any doctor would be able to do much more than relieve her complaint, which, if the truth were known, did not cause her any serious inconvenience. But Mrs. Burwash was inquisitive, and liked to find out all she could about people, whoever they might be.

It was for this reason that she was almost always to be found in the front garden of Quenbies with a rake or some other gardening implement in hand. The front garden consisted of no more than a patch of turf between the house and the road, with a central path leading from the gate to the front door and a herbaceous border to either side. But dividing it from the road was a tall privet hedge, which in places had worn thin. From behind it she could both observe passersby and overhear their conversation.

Corringham, who thoroughly appreciated her directness of speech, always maintained that her appearance did not belie her and that Mrs. Burwash was a witch. "You've got a rival in the village," he said to Alida, soon after her arrival. "You may do your best to cure your patients, but if they are under the spell of black magic all your drugs and treatment are vain. The only thing to do is to apply counter magic. And I dare say they've given up teaching sorcery in the medical schools."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," Alida replied. "But this sounds interesting, Sir Mark. Who is the local sorcerer? I'd love to make his acquaintance. He might give me some tips."

Corringham chuckled. "It's not him but her. Mrs. Burwash, who lives in that house called Quenbies not far down the village from my lodge gates. She hasn't been here very long, and ever since she came all sorts of queer things have happened. It's my belief she bewitches everybody she doesn't like, so it'll pay you to keep on good terms with her."

Alida remembered this conversation when she was sent for a couple of days later. Mrs. Burwash's method of conveying her

summons was characteristic of her. Tom Docking, who made a habit of calling at the White Bull during his dinner-hour, heard a strident voice from behind the Quenbies privet hedge as he was going back to work one afternoon. "Come here, my man!" was the imperious demand. "You're the gardener at the doctor's house, aren't you?"

Tom halted at the gate and touched his cap. "Yes, mum," he replied. "That's right."

"Then you can take this note for me," said Mrs Burwash, appearing into the open. "Don't forget it, for it's important, and don't mess it about with your filthy fingers. Give it to the doctor as soon as you get to the house. And here's sixpence for you."

"Thank'ee, mum," Tom replied, once more touching his cap. "I'll be sure to give it to Dr. Mountwell at once." He took the note and went on his way. When he reached Four-square he knocked on the surgery door, which was opened by Alida herself. They were already very good friends, for she had praised the chrysanthemums, which were Tom's special pride. "Hallo, Tom," she greeted him cheerfully. "What can I do for you?"

"I've got a note for you, miss," Tom replied. "Mrs Burwash called me as I was passing and asked me to bring it along. She told me to give it to you at once."

"Thank you, Tom. I'm much obliged to you." Alida opened the note, which was direct and to the point. "The Hon. Mrs Burwash will be obliged if Dr. Mountwell will call upon her at eleven o'clock precisely to-morrow (Wednesday) morning."

Alida, in contrast to Hermione, was always a minute or two before time and never five minutes after. She arrived at Quenbies before the church clock struck the hour and opened the gate, to find her path barred by a gaunt figure with a hoe. "You're the doctor, I suppose," said Mrs Burwash, eyeing Alida critically. "I heard the new locum was a woman. I said in my note eleven o'clock precisely. But it's better than being late. Come in."

She led the way into her sitting-room, which from its resemblance to a witch's cavern afforded some justification for Corringham's affirmation. It was a low dark room, with heavy oak beams and thick curtains drawn half-way across the windows. The walls were hung with all manner of hideous curios from the jungle, witch-doctor's masks, skins of animals, and a dozen other objects of sinister appearance.

half-hidden in the gloom. Mrs Burwash planted herself in a chair and motioned to Alida to do likewise "I've got sprue," she announced with an air of pride in being afflicted with so uncommon a complaint.

But it was not Alida's habit to be impressed by her patients' self-diagnosis. "Have you had it long, Mrs Burwash?" she asked in businesslike tones "Do you mind turning round towards the light and opening your mouth wide? Thank you."

Followed a short conversation, in which Mrs Burwash described her symptoms in lurid detail, and Alida promised to send her a bottle of medicine At the end of it Alida would have got up to go, but Mrs. Burwash laid a skinny and detaining hand upon her knee. "Sit down," she said sharply. "I want to talk to you Did you know that interfering person who was here before you came?"

"I don't know who you're talking about, Mrs. Burwash," Alida replied, with all the professional dignity at her command. "And I really must be going. I have other patients to see this morning"

"They can wait," said Mrs Burwash with her customary decision "And you know perfectly well who I'm talking about That Wiegler creature. Did you know him, I ask?"

Alida shook her head Obviously it would be best to humour this persistent old woman "I never met him," she replied. "But I have heard a lot about him since I have been here And everybody is agreed that he was a very capable and clever doctor."

"Rubbish!" Mrs Burwash exclaimed "He didn't understand my sprue, however capable and clever he may have been I told him as much the very day he was killed I'd asked him to come here at eleven o'clock precisely, and he had the impudence to keep me waiting until nearly twelve And I'm not accustomed to be kept waiting, I may tell you"

"I'm sure you're not, Mrs Burwash," said Alida with exaggerated simplicity

Mrs Burwash glared at her "Don't you dare to be saucy with me And what do you think the nitwit said to me when he did come? He told me that I ought to go to some hospital or other for tropical diseases, where I should receive proper treatment Hospital, indeed! What was he here for if he couldn't give me proper treatment himself? That's what doctors are paid for But I suppose you're like the rest of them. Ready to take any chance of shifting your responsibility on to someone else."

"Thank if you'll follow my advice for a week or two you'll find that the symptoms will be relieved," said Alida brightly, making another attempt to disengage herself from Mrs. Burwash's clutches. But she was again unsuccessful, for the lawlike hand merely tightened the grasp "I told you I wanted to talk to you, and it will be worth your while to listen to me. What made you come to this place? You're far too young and pretty to waste your time feeling pulses and looking down people's throats"

Alida couldn't help smiling at this unexpected compliment. "Thank you, Mrs. Burwash," she said "But youth and prettiness don't last. It's always seemed to me that a medical degree is a much better investment. Don't you think so too?"

"Never mind what I think," Mrs. Burwash replied "And let me tell you something You won't think so any longer when the right man comes along. You'll fling your stethoscope and your scalpels over the moon sharp enough then And until that happens, take my advice. Don't go mooning about near the edges of any gravel-pits. They aren't healthy hereabouts"

Mrs. Burwash took her hand away with a jerk, and it was evident that the interview was at an end Alida left the house, wondering what in the world the woman had meant. Her warning had, of course, some reference to the fate of her predecessor, of the mystery of whose death Alida was keenly conscious. She had heard a lot about Wiegler since she had been at Exton Forcett Although the man was dead his spirit seemed to haunt the place uneasily People seemed unable to avoid talking about him, with the exception of Hermione, who never mentioned his name unless it was absolutely necessary for her to do so Everybody else, from the Corringhams to the least articulate of her panel patients, had some tale or other to tell of his enormities. But all of them puffed awkwardly at any discussion of his death He had been found dead at the bottom of a gravel-pit, and his remains now lay in the churchyard R.I.P.

The very reticence with which she was surrounded was evidence enough of mystery It was perfectly plain that every one was desperately anxious to uphold the jury's verdict, even against their inner convictions. It almost seemed to Alida, coming to the place after the event, that the whole village must have been engaged in some fantastic conspiracy There was no doubt that Wiegler had made himself intensely unpopular. He, a complete stranger, had tried to convert

the population to his own views and ways, and it was notorious that such missionaries frequently came to a violent end. But it was inconceivable that Exton Forcett had indulged in communal murder. Alida came to the conclusion that something had happened which must at all costs be kept a profound secret.

Her feminine curiosity prompted her to make one attempt at least to probe the mystery. It happened that Bob Tipping contrived to poison his hand while carrying out some job or other, and for some days became a regular visitor to the surgery. While his hand was being dressed, he used to entertain Alida with a budget of local gossip, and the two became friends. So much so, that she thought she might venture on the direct question.

"It was at the end of his sequence of visits, when the hand was nearly healed. The two were alone in the surgery, the windows of which were blacked-out and the door securely shut. "There you are," Alida said cheerfully as she pinned up the last dressing. "I think you'll be all right now, Bob. You needn't come again to see me till this day week, unless your hand gives you any trouble. Dr. Wiegler might have cured it quicker than I have, if he'd been here. By the way, talking of Dr. Wiegler. He wasn't murdered, was he?"

Bob's intelligent face assumed an expression of innocent amazement. "Murdered, miss!" he exclaimed. "Whatever makes you say such a thing? There was a proper inquest up at the House, with the coroner and a jury and all, and they gave it as accidental death."

"Yes, I know," said Alida tranquilly. "But juries do make mistakes sometimes, I believe."

Bob got up and peeped apprehensively round the screen which shut off part of the surgery. Satisfied that nobody was hidden there, he tiptoed back and whispered in Alida's ear. "It's this way, miss. Some say this and some say that. But it's my opinion that there are folk who know very well what happened." And with that cryptic remark he went out.

The elusiveness of it all intrigued Alida as she went to bed that night. It was like a detective story without the detective. A man had been killed, and the community in which he had lived had made up their minds that he had been murdered. Yet nobody, from the highest to the lowest, seemed in any way disposed to track down his murderer. Not, Alida thought, solely because of the victim's unpopularity. There was in the air a suggestion of far deeper significance than that.

Alida got into bed she took a last look round the big, high-ceilinged room. The telephone extension upon the table beside the bed was switched through, and close to it was the electric lamp and torch. On a chair against the wall was the shelter-suit she always kept in readiness. It was a favourite contention among the scoffers that it would be no use calling up a lady doctor at night, for she would take so long to dress and titivate herself that the patient would be dead before she got to him. Alida, however, prided herself that she could be suitably clad in something under two minutes. As a matter of fact, when she was summoned at some unearthly hour of the night she contrived to get to the case more rapidly than either St John Cecil or Wiegler would have done.

Satisfied that everything was in readiness in case of emergency she got into bed and turned out the light. Usually she was asleep within a very few minutes, but to-night what she had come to think of as the Wiegler mystery intruded upon her thoughts. It was not that she felt the slightest urge to play the part of the missing detective. If Wiegler had indeed been murdered, which seemed rather fantastic, it was no concern of hers. But it would be rather fun to get to the bottom of the affair.

Of course, Alida had heard whispers of the theory first formulated by Jim Leader at the White Bull. Wiegler might have been a spy, an enemy agent, a fifth columnist, anything you liked. Alida privately thought this extremely unlikely, for Exton Forcett seemed to be hardly a convenient centre for espionage. But what seemed even more unlikely was that the authorities would have acted so melodramatically. Their methods usually followed the more prosaic sequence of a court-martial behind closed doors, the Tower of London, and a firing party at dawn. But there was just one thing which was—well, queer.

Hermione felt bound to talk about something, when, as not very frequently happened, she and Alida were alone together. And, since the subject of her husband was barred, she more often than not talked about her son. Alida, not listening with any great attention, for Hermione's monologues bored her, nevertheless picked up various scraps of information about Roland. How he had distinguished himself at school, how popular he was in the village, how fond of him were Sir Mark and Lady Corringham. And finally that proud confidence which Hermione simply could not withhold. "And now, you know, Roland is in the Secret Service." Roland had been on

leave when Wiegler had been killed, Alida had been told. Yes, it was, well, queer

Unknown to Hermione, Alida had struck another source of information concerning Roland. From the first day of her arrival at Foursquare she had taken pity on the secretary-dispenser, whom Hermione so rigidly called Miss Draper. She had set herself out to win, if not the affection, at least the friendship, of this reserved and rather colourless girl, and had succeeded beyond her expectations. Although there was only six years' difference in their ages, Alida's experience and knowledge of the world made her a generation older than Eileen Draper, who came to treat her as almost a mother. Eileen, it would appear, was starved for want of someone in whom to confide. Alida was mildly amused to find that much of the confidences she poured out concerned Roland. It was perfectly clear that in Eileen's eyes he was the pattern of manly beauty and chivalry. And it transpired that during a hastily-snatched word with her on the morning of the very day on which Wiegler had been killed, Roland had asked her if Dr. Wiegler had ever annoyed her in any way.

"And what did you say?" Alida asked her not without interest

"Oh, I told Roland the truth, of course," Eileen had replied. "I said he had always been very kind to me. He used to say that I was wasted here, in a little country place like this. And he said that after the war he would find me a post in London, where he'd be able to give me a good time. But, of course, I told him that I couldn't leave Dr. Cecil like that."

"Did you tell your young friend Roland all this?" Alida asked, vastly amused

"Oh, yes, and he didn't like it a bit. He said he'd punch Dr. Wiegler's head for saying things like that to me. But in the end I made him promise that he wouldn't do anything."

It was through these rather different channels that Alida arrived at much the same conclusions that Corringham had already reached. But she was detached enough to realise that there were other candidates in the field besides Roland, whom she thought it might be amusing to meet. From Mrs. Plowman she had received a detailed catalogue of Wiegler's acts of aggression against her husband. The row they had had over the quite unavoidable accident which had befallen Fred Sambourne. The interview between them on the day before the doctor had fallen into the gravel-pit. That had been more than just an ordinary row, for Wiegler had expressed his

of formally accusing Mr. Plowman of fraudulent practice on the following Monday. Mrs Plowman had conveyed the impression that it was lucky for her husband that the doctor had died before he could put this intention into effect. He might have made things very awkward indeed.

And, apart from his feud with Mr Plowman, it was perfectly obvious to Alida that Wiegler had contrived to rub nearly every one in the place up the wrong way. Any of these people might have been tempted by a sudden and unexpectedly favourable opportunity. Not deliberate and premeditated murder, she thought. But if someone whom he had exasperated had come upon him standing absorbed upon the brink of the pit, a gentle push would have been almost irresistible. It must be realised that Alida knew nothing of Merrion's theory of the crime, for both Merrion and Corringham had kept this strictly to themselves.

As for Mrs Burwash's cryptic warning, that was merely ridiculous. Mrs Burwash was shrewd and level-headed enough, in spite of her peculiarities. But this time she had been talking rubbish. Alida was not in the least likely to go wandering about near the edge of a gravel-pit. And even if she did, she thought it most unlikely that any of her new acquaintances would push her over. Even Hermione, of whose antipathy she was well aware, would hardly go to such lengths. On the whole, Alida told herself, she was making quite a success of herself in Exton Forcett.

On this comforting note she went to sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ONE DAY shortly before Christmas, and therefore a month or more after Wiegler's death, Corringham attended Marbeach police court in his capacity of a justice of the peace. The session was short, one case of assault, one of selling a vegetable-marrows at a penny above the controlled price, and one of showing a light during the black-out. These cases were expeditiously dealt with, and Corringham was leaving the court when he was intercepted by Mr. Gunthorpe, the solicitor to whom he had recommended Hermione, and who had been unsuccessfully defending the malefactor, convicted of profiteering in vegetable-marrows. "I want a word with you, Corringham," said Mr Gunthorpe. "Could you come round

to my office for five minutes? It's only a couple of doors away."

Corringham agreed, and accompanied the solicitor "Bit hard on my client, weren't you?" Mr Gunthorpe said when they were seated before the fire "Five guineas and costs seems a bit stiff. However, that's not what I want to see you about. I've got in touch with that fellow Wiegler's heir at last. He's a fellow called Kingsbury and he's a farmer in Sussex."

"Mrs Cecil will be glad to hear that," Corringham replied. "She's always grumbling that she's got a cupboard full of Wiegler's things, and she wishes someone would come over and take them away."

"The fellow's coming here to-morrow, and I proposed to drive him over to Exton Forcett. It seems that he hadn't heard of Wiegler's death till the other day, and he'll almost certainly want to know something about it. I want to ask you if I can bring him to see you. You're a man of authority and you were on the spot almost as soon as anybody. You would be the best person to give him details at first hand."

Corringham frowned. The very last thing he wanted was to discuss the manner of Wiegler's death with any one interested. But if he refused, this fellow would in all probability seek information elsewhere. In which case he would infallibly hear strange rumours, which he might feel it his duty to follow up. And then the whole matter would be reopened, with results which it was impossible to forecast.

"All right, bring him along and I'll tell him what I know," Corringham replied without enthusiasm. "Who is he, and how did you get hold of him?"

"I know nothing about him, but I'll tell you how I managed to trace him. It's a long story, but these are the principal points. After Mrs Cecil had been to see me, I put advertisements in the papers. Any one having knowledge of the will of the late Dr Kurt Wiegler is requested to communicate—You know the sort of thing, I expect."

Corringham nodded and Gunthorpe went on. "It was some little time before I had any answer, and then I got a letter from a firm of solicitors in a London suburb. Their attention had been called to my advertisement. They had not been informed of Dr. Wiegler's death, nor had they been in communication with him since the outbreak of war, and a lot more like that. But the point was this. They were in possession of a will of Dr. Wiegler's, which he had given into their

many years ago. Under the terms of the will of Francis Edwin Kingsbury was sole executor and he had traced this gentleman, and asked him to communicate with me. He did so, saying that he would call on me to-morrow afternoon."

So it happened that on the following day Francis Kingsbury arrived at Exton Forcett in company with Mr. Gunthorpe. He was short and spare, with closely-cropped reddish hair and a faint suggestion of horsiness. Corringham, not greatly impressed by either his appearance or his manner, put him down as being somewhere in the forties.

"Fine place you've got here, Sir Mark," he said, shaking Corringham warmly by the hand. "Very good of you to promise to tell me all about poor old Kurt's death. He fell over the edge of a gravel-pit, so Gunthorpe tells me. Just like him. But first of all I'd better tell you what I'm doing here. I've already satisfied Gunthorpe that I'm the right man for his book."

"You are Dr. Wiegler's heir, I understand," Corringham replied coldly.

"That's right, though I didn't know it till the other day. I had a letter from a firm of solicitors in Cricklewood, saying that if I called upon them I might hear of something to my advantage. I wasn't a bit keen on going at first, for I thought it might be a trick to get money out of me. You know what cunning devils these lawyers are."

"Thank you for the compliment, Mr. Kingsbury," said Gunthorpe acidly.

"Oh, present company excepted, of course," Kingsbury replied, not in the least abashed. "I talked to some of the chaps about it, and they said I'd better go. Even if I had a writ served on me for my pains, I shouldn't be much worse off than I was already. So I went, and after a lot of palaver I was told that old Kurt was dead and had left a will in my favour. I very nearly dropped down dead with astonishment. I'd almost forgotten all about old Kurt, for I hadn't seen or heard anything of him for years."

"He hadn't forgotten you, it appears," Gunthorpe remarked. "Were you a relation of Dr. Wiegler's?"

"No relation. I first met him years ago, when he was still walking the hospitals. He was a devil of a fellow in those days. My word, the times we've had together! It would make you gentlemen's hair stand on end if I were to tell you about them. But that's neither here nor there. The lawyer chap showed me

to letter which was attached to the will. It had been written by old Kurt twenty years and more ago and was addressed to me. And it said that if Kurt died before me, which was unlikely, and if he had anything to leave, which was more unlikely still, he'd like me to have it as a reward for what I'd done for him."

"Very nice," Gunthorpe observed. "Had you done anything particular for him?"

"I'd saved his life, if that's anything. It was this way. We were very thick at the time, and I'm bound to say we've been going the pace a bit. So much so that we both found it convenient to get out of town for a while. Kurt suggested that we might go for a walking tour in the Lakes till things quieted down, and I fell in with this. Where we went and what we did I've pretty well forgotten. All except one afternoon, when we found ourselves at a God-forsaken spot miles from a pub, or any other house for that matter.

"Old Kurt was always very keen on watching birds. He'd potter round for hours with a pair of binoculars, looking at them. What sort of a thrill he got out of it I never understood, but there it was. Well, on this particular afternoon, we'd got on to a hillside, and at one place there was a steep drop into one of those big ponds, tarns I believe they call them. Old Kurt walked to the edge of this drop, and put up his binoculars to look at some bird or other he'd seen in the distance. I wasn't sorry to take a rest, and I sat down on the ground close by. All of a sudden I heard him holler out, and when I looked he wasn't there. He'd gone clean down over the edge into the water below. Must have taken a step forward without looking where he was going."

Corringham and Gunthorpe exchanged glances. That was exactly the theory adopted by the jury of the events leading to Wiegler's death. History, it seemed, had repeated itself. "That's very much what happened here," Corringham muttered. "Go on, Mr. Kingsbury."

"Well, I peeped over and there was old Kurt floundering about in that blessed tarn. I couldn't help laughing, for he looked so damn funny. And then, when he went under, I realised that it wasn't such a joke as all that. You see, the tarn was devilish deep, and the bank where he'd fallen in was so smooth and steep he couldn't get hold of it. On the far side it was flat enough, but old Kurt couldn't swim, and he'd never have got there."

"There wasn't a living soul within miles, so if he was to be

"I'd got to do it myself. Luckily I'm a pretty swimmer, or I was in those days. I dived in, got hold of him after the very dickens of a struggle landed him safe on the farther bank. He wasn't much the worse for it, except that he'd drunk more water than he ever had before in his life, and he'd lost his binoculars.

"Well, that was that. Old Kurt was absurdly grateful. He babbled on about being indebted for his life to me, and all that sort of thing. It was true enough, but, as I told him, I couldn't say well have stood there and watched him drown. But he kept on saying that he'd find a way of rewarding me some day. Then that would be, neither of us knew, for we were both broke to the wide at the time. I remember we had to pawn our watches before we could get back to town. It didn't matter very much, for the soaking in the tarn hadn't done them any good.

"But the queer thing was Kurt took his ducking very much to heart. Said that he'd never have done such a silly thing if his brains hadn't been so sodden with alcohol, and that he'd take jolly good care it didn't happen again. As I told you, he'd been a proper lad till then. But from that moment he became as steady as a rock. Quite a reformed character, as you might say. With the result that he lost touch with all his old friends, myself among them. I'll admit that I'd almost forgotten him; and I got the shock of my life when that solicitor-chap at Cricklewood showed me the letter and the will."

"An unexpected inheritance, in fact," Corringham remarked. "Well, you certainly deserved it for saving his life like that. Whatever you may say it was a plucky thing to do, for he might very well have drowned you both. Dr. Wiegler had saved a considerable amount of money, I believe."

"I hope so, for I can do with it," Kingsbury replied earnestly. "The truth is, I've been deuced-unlucky with the gee-gees this last year or two. But the chap at Cricklewood couldn't tell me anything about that. All he knew was that he'd drawn up this will for old Kurt, who was living in rooms nearby at that time. He'd only seen him once or twice since, and that not recently. That's why I'm particularly anxious to see what old Kurt left behind him here."

"That's easily arranged," said Corringham. "I told Mrs. Cecil you were coming over, and she said you were welcome to look over Dr. Wiegler's effects at any time. We'll go along there presently, but first I expect you'd like to hear how your friend met his death."

to Kingsbury listened, a trifle impatiently, to Corringham's account of the events of that Sunday morning. "Well, I'm blest!" he exclaimed when the story was told. "So he did do it again after all. I should have thought he'd have been more careful, and kept away from places like that. Once bitten, twice shy, you know. He hadn't by any chance taken to lifting the elbow again, had he?"

"To the best of my knowledge Dr. Wiegler was practically a teetotaller," Corringham replied. "Now, shall we go and call on Mrs. Cecil? We may as well walk and save petrol. It isn't very far, not more than half a mile at the most."

It was a fine afternoon as the three walked through the village. Corringham caught a glimpse of Mrs. Burwash, a gaunt and shadowy figure behind the privet hedge. And, a little farther on, a group by the roadside. A couple of old men passing the time of day with Bert, taking the air as usual in his wheel-chair.

They all touched their caps as the squire approached, and Corringham stopped for a word. "Good-afternoon, all," he said. "So the fine weather's brought you out, has it, Bert? Where are you bound for?"

Bert grinned. "Well, sir, I'm bound your way, if the truth is to be told," he replied. "It's this way. I do a bit of reading these long evenings, when I can't get about. And Mr. Yates is kind enough to lend me a book every now and then."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Corringham. "You tell Yates that if there's any book of ours in the house you'd like to read, he is to lend it to you. Good-day to you."

"Very decent chap, that," he continued, as he moved on with his companions. "He was a builder's labourer, and had a very bad accident some years ago. Lost the use of both his legs, and can only get about in that wheel-chair of his. I'm glad to hear he's taken to reading. It'll give him something to think about besides his infirmities."

They met several more of the villagers before they reached Foursquare, and although Corringham exchanged salutations with them, he did not stop again. When they reached their destination, they were shown by Mabel into the drawing-room, where Hermione was expecting them, Lady Corringham having rung her up to say they were on their way. Kingsbury had scarcely been introduced to her before they heard that tell-tale creak of the baize door, and a moment later Alida entered the room. Seeing the visitors, however, she merely smiled at Corringham and retired again without a word.

Kingsbury stared open-eyed at her as the door closed behind her. "I say, that's a deuced fine girl!" he exclaimed. "Your daughter, I dare say, Mrs Cecil?"

"No!" Hermione replied shortly. "That is Dr. Mountwell, who has taken Dr. Wiegler's place. Now if you will come with me, please, I will show you everything that belonged to Dr. Wiegler."

The three of them followed Hermione to a large cupboard at the end of the passage, packed with a trunk, several suitcases, and a number of cardboard boxes. "There you are," she said. "I packed Dr. Wiegler's clothes and instruments in the trunk and the suitcases. All the papers I found I put in those cardboard boxes."

"It's the papers I want," Kingsbury replied. Without further ado he set to work rummaging through the boxes, turning over their contents eagerly. At last he came upon a cheque-book which he withdrew triumphantly. "That's it!" he exclaimed as he opened the book. "Now we shall know where old Kurt kept his account. The Home Counties Bank, Piccadilly Branch. That sounds posh enough to me. I can take this, I suppose?"

"As Dr. Wiegler's executor, it is your duty to dispose of the lot," replied Gunthorpe, to whom this question was addressed. "Mrs Cecil's very anxious to get it out of her way, I know."

"I'll arrange for these boxes to be collected and sent down to my place," said Kingsbury, pocketing the cheque-book. "There may be something in them I can turn into money. All the other junk had better go to a sale, for I've no use for it. You can leave it to me, Mrs Cecil. And now we'd better be getting along. I want to get back to town to-night, so that I can see the bank manager the first thing to-morrow."

Hermione made no attempt to detain them, and they returned to Exton House, where Gunthorpe's car was waiting. In this he and Kingsbury drove off to Marbeach Corringham, with a sigh of relief, joined his wife for a much-needed cup of tea over the library fire.

"Well, how did you get on this afternoon?" Lady Corringham asked as she poured out the tea.

Her husband laughed. "Oh, all right, I suppose. Kingsbury I should describe as the perfect type of bounder. His only claim to merit is that he saved Wiegler's life, or says he did, some thirty years ago. If indeed that was a meritorious act. Some people wouldn't think so. I'll tell you the story as I heard it, for in a way it's rather curious."

He proceeded to do so. "Now you see why I called curious," he went on. "Mind you, we've only got word for all this, and he's not the sort of person who me with any great confidence. But there are several points in his story. For instance, Wiegler's early profligacy and his watery conversion. It's certainly quite true, whatever faults Hermione used to find with him, she never accused him of any sort of riotous living. And when he here he never drank more than a single glass of wine. I know, he wouldn't touch. Then there's the matter of rescue. It almost looks as though Wiegler made a habit stepping into space. Had he some obscure complaint which made him unable to perceive the edge of a precipice? he had gone over it? It sounds remotely possible. I wish Merrion had been here to listen to our conversation."

"Captain Merrion?" Lady Corringham asked. "Why, whatever had it got to do with him?"

"Oh, nothing whatever," her husband replied hastily. "He took a considerable interest in the affair, that's all. I didn't like Kingsbury any more than I liked Wiegler. It's true: he told us that he had lost sight of his friend long ago, but even so he might have expressed a decent sorrow for his death. But he did nothing of the kind. He was palpably bored whilst I was telling him how it happened. All he cared about was to find out how much his inheritance was worth. And when we got to Foursquare there was a most absurd moment. He accused Hermione of being Alida Mountwell's mother."

"He did what?" Lady Corringham demanded in an incredulous tone.

"Perhaps that's rather a figurative way of putting it. Alida put her head round the door while we were in the drawing-room, and obviously made a great impression on Kingsbury. When she'd gone out again, he remarked that she was a fine girl and that he supposed she was Mrs Cecil's daughter. Hermione looked daggers at him, I really don't know why. I should have thought she'd have been flattered to be taken for the mother of a good-looking girl like Alida."

Lady Corringham sighed heavily at this evidence of masculine obtuseness. "My dear silly man, can't you see?" she exclaimed. "It was the greatest insult any one could have offered her. In the first place, her disapproval of Alida grows every day, though I confess I don't know why. Haven't you noticed that she still calls her Dr Mountwell to her face, just as she always calls that poor girl Eileen, Miss Draper? Then

not all that difference in their ages, or at all events Hermione wouldn't like people to think there was. She prides herself that she looks barely forty, while Alida is thirty. I know that, for she told me so herself."

Corringham shrugged his shoulders "I can't make Hermione out," he said. "I know it must be trying to have a stranger living in the house, but she doesn't seem to make the slightest attempt to put a good face on necessity. Wiegler was an irritating sort of chap and there was every excuse for her disliking him. But Alida's charming, and I should have thought Hermione would have been glad to have her as a companion. There's one thing about it. I don't fancy Alida cares one way or the other. She's far too keen on her professional duties to let personal considerations worry her. And from what I see and hear, she's doing St. John's practice as much good as Wiegler did it harm. Hermione ought at least to be grateful to her for that."

After his wife had left the room Corringham's thoughts returned to Kingsbury, and what he had said, particularly his story of his rescue of Wiegler. There was no means of testing the truth of this, for he was now the only living witness of the incident. But there was this about it. It furnished a possible reason for Wiegler having made Kingsbury his heir. But was it the true reason? Might there not have been some closer association between the two men than that of rescuer and rescued?

However, accepting the incident as Kingsbury had described it, Wiegler, it appeared, had stepped forward over the edge of the tarn while he was bird-watching. Probably he had his binoculars to his eyes, and wanted to get a better view of whatever it was he was looking at. Perhaps this was precisely what had happened on the brink of the gravel-pit. It was all very well for Merrion to construct a wholly imaginary crime on the evidence of a coat-button and a couple of pine-needles. Their evidence might be explained in a dozen different ways. He would never have evolved such a fanciful theory if he had known of this earlier adventure of Wiegler's. Corringham tried to persuade himself that he had allowed Merrion's words to weigh with him unduly.

But his efforts were not entirely successful. He was perfectly well aware that the village shared with him a vague and possibly unfounded suspicion of foul play. By his actions that very afternoon he had lent countenance to one of the fantastic rumours that were flying about. It was really time that he

pulled himself together and put the Wiegler incident out of mind. There was clearly nothing he could do about it.

But the ghost of Wiegler refused to be disregarded summarily. It persisted in flitting about the dark corners of Corringham's brain, a dimly-glimpsed spectre behind his practical thoughts. Kingsbury's visit had brought it to foreground. He certainly had expressed no suspicion that friend's death had not been accidental. But then, why he? It was not the circumstances of that death that concerned him, but the results that accrued from it. Corringham not likely to forget the eager satisfaction with which he had snatched at the cheque-book. From the hints he had dropped it was pretty clear that the man was in desperate straits for money.

From this it was but a step to wonder whether his ignorance of the affair was as complete as he had pretended. His statements could not be checked. Was it really a fact that he had lost touch with Wiegler many years before, and had not seen him since that time? Was it a fact that he did not know of the existence of the will until the Cricklewood solicitor had shown it to him? He had admitted his knowledge of Wiegler's hobby of bird-watching. And, as Merrion had pointed out, to stalk a bird-watcher in Gallows Wood would be the easiest thing in the world. Corringham had no intention of talking about such things to any one else, even to quiet his own conscience. Wiegler was dead, the unspeakable Kingsbury had come and gone, a passing shadow across the peaceful background of Exton Forcett. Hermione would now be relieved of the responsibility for Wiegler's effects, and with their removal it might be hoped that all memory of Wiegler would fade into the past.

His thoughts turned to Hermione, and what his wife had said about her attitude towards Alida Mountwell. What was the matter with the woman? Was she definitely ill-natured, or merely stupid? It seemed to Corringham that she was putting up a very bad show. He tried to imagine what life at Four-square must be like for a bright, cheerful, sociable girl like Alida, forced to live in an atmosphere of silent disapproval. After all, she wasn't forced to remain there. He knew very well that if, as she herself said, she wanted to work as a locum for the sake of gaining experience, she was not tied to Exton Forcett. She could find a dozen similar openings elsewhere without the slightest difficulty. And if Hermione weren't jolly careful, the girl might take herself off one fine morning,

ring her in the lurch. He must ask Sylvia if she couldn't give her a hint to that effect.

Corringham's meditations were interrupted by a telephone call from Leonard announcing that he was coming home next day for forty-eight hours' leave. "I managed to wangle it because I was recalled last time before my leave was up," he said. "I'm coming alone, for none of my friends seem able to get away just now. Midday train at Marbeach. So long, Admiral. All filial regards to her ladyship. See you both to-morrow."

Corringham lost no time in conveying the message to his wife. "The boy's coming home alone," he said. "I hope he won't be bored with only two old people to talk to. All the young people that he used to know round about have gone. And he can't get about as he'd like to with that leg of his. I tell you what. Ring up Alida Mountwell and ask her to come to tea to-morrow. He'd love to meet her, I'm sure."

Lady Corringham smiled. "What's in your mind, I wonder? I'll ask Alida to come, by all means. But you realise, surely, that I can't ask her without inviting Hermione to tea to-morrow as well."

"All right, ask them both. And while Hermione's here you might take the opportunity of suggesting to her that if she doesn't try to make herself a lot more pleasant to Alida, she'll find herself looking for another locum."

The invitation was duly issued. Alida accepted, but Hermione explained that she couldn't possibly manage it. It was Mabel's day out, and she couldn't possibly leave the house when there was so much to be done. Besides, Mrs. Laverock was coming over in the afternoon to discuss some matter concerning the District Nurse. Hermione was very sorry, for it would have been so nice to see Leonard again. Perhaps while he was home he would find time to come and see her.

Alida duly came to tea next day, and though she could not stay long as she had a couple of patients to see before her surgery hour, her visit was a great success. She got on famously with Leonard Corringham, who expressed himself enthusiastically after she had gone. "I say, that girl is a top-notch!" he exclaimed. "Some people have all the luck. I never had a doctor like that all the time I was in hospital. Just as well, perhaps, for my susceptible heart would have beaten so fast that when she tried to take my pulse she wouldn't have been able to count it. And just fancy the thrill of having a thermometer put under one's tongue by a girl like

that ! Do you think if I asked her she'd come and massage artificial leg ? I'm quite sure I can feel a twinge of rheuma in it."

Lady Corringham smiled. "I wouldn't try any games Alida Mountwell, if I were you," she replied. "She isn't sort of person to stand any nonsense, I warn you !"

"Games !" Leonard exclaimed in a shocked voice. "You misunderstand me, your Ladyship. My intentions are honourable, I assure you. But I wonder you let her loose the house when the Admiral's around. I saw him to her just now."

"You're a graceless young cub," said Corringham. "A man may whisper to his medical adviser, surely. How do you know I haven't got rheumatism, too ? But, seriously, she's an acquisition to the place, isn't she ?"

"She's marvellous," his son replied. "Where on earth did Hermione discover her ?"

"Hermione didn't," said Lady Corringham. "She cabled out to St. John and he sent her along."

"And the joke of it is that Hermione didn't know that this Dr. Mountwell who was coming was a woman until she turned up," Corringham remarked.

"St. John sent her along, did he ?" said Leonard. "Well, I admire his taste. Has young Roland set eyes on her yet ? I hope not, for Eileen Draper's sake."

"What nonsense are you talking now ?" his mother asked. "Roland hasn't been home since Alida has been here. And what has Eileen Draper got to do with it ?"

"Didn't you know about Roland's romance ? It's an old story. Child Roland to the dispensary came, and fell violently and quite virtuously in love with its fair occupant. And he was quite serious about it as recently as that day last month when we had that shooting party. He told me then, when we happened to be alone together for a few minutes, that he didn't a bit like Eileen being alone with Wiegler in that annexe at Foursquare. And he also said that he meant to give him a piece of his mind about something he'd said to her. It was all very incoherent, but he's young and I suppose fancies he's in love. It'll be a pity if Alida Mountwell deflects him from the object of his youthful and blameless adoration."

"Poor Hermione !" said Lady Corringham. "She's always so set her heart on Roland marrying a really nice girl of good position in the world. She's often told me so. And neither Eileen nor Alida would come up to her ideals at all."

"What's the matter with Alida Mountwell?" Leonard asked. "You wouldn't find a nicer girl anywhere."

"Perhaps not," his mother replied. "But Hermione doesn't think so. By the way, she'd like you to go and see her if you can manage it. She said so particularly."

Leonard's ready acceptance of the suggestion was slightly transparent, at all events to his father, who knew very well that he would not put himself out so far as to go to Foursquare for the sake of seeing Hermione alone. It was fairly obvious that he thought it would be an opportunity of meeting Alida again. Well, why not?

Corringham, although he had never mentioned the matter, even to his wife, had more than once wondered what his son's future would be. Some day he would be Sir Leonard, with Exton House and the undefined responsibility of "the squire" on his hands. It most certainly was not a job for a bachelor. Leonard was now thirty-seven and beyond a few perfectly harmless flirtations, had never seemed to take any very great interest in women. Certainly not enough to induce him to contemplate marrying any of them.

It wouldn't be at all a bad thing if he and Alida hit it off. Corringham knew very well that both Sylvia and himself would welcome her as a daughter-in-law. She would be an eminently suitable person to perform the duties which would be expected of the future Lady Corringham. It was sincerely to be hoped that Leonard's admiration would turn to something more substantial.

CHAPTER EIGHT

EARLY in the New Year Hermione received a cable from St. John. "Am on way home wire you on arrival." She read this over several times, wondering what exactly it meant. Then, feeling a desperate need to communicate the news to someone, hurried with it to Exton House.

"Isn't it marvellous?" she exclaimed to Sir Mark and Lady Corringham. "Fancy having St. John at home again, instead of all that way off! I can't believe it. But I do wish he'd told me a little more, when I might expect him, and all that sort of thing."

"He couldn't tell you that," Corringham replied. "I don't suppose he knows himself. He says he'll wire you on arrival,

which means when he lands in England, I expect. But he not be able to get here for some little time after that."

"Oh, Mark, don't say that," said Hermione. "He that he's on his way home, and that means here"

Corringham shook his head. "Not necessarily. It may mean only that he's on his way to this country. We can't tell why or wherefore from this cable. But I don't imagine that he's coming home on leave. It's far more likely that he's been posted to somewhere in England. And, if that's the case, he'll probably have to report there before he gets leave to come home."

Hermione's face fell at this. "How terribly disappointing!" she exclaimed. "I did hope he would come straight here. There's so much I want to talk to him about. But perhaps, after all, it's just as well. If he's stationed in England I can go and see him wherever it is. And then we should be able to make arrangements for the future. Something must be done. I can't go on like this"

It was on the tip of Corringham's tongue to ask "Like what?" but he caught a glance from Sylvia and said nothing. They both knew that Hermione had worked herself up to a state in which she disliked Alida as much as she had Wiegler. And it was easy enough to guess that what she wanted to talk to St. John about concerned a change of locums.

"I shouldn't make any definite arrangements until you hear that St. John has landed," said Lady Corringham. "He'll contrive to see you somehow, you may be sure of that. And I don't suppose you'll have very long to wait, as he says he's actually on the way."

Lady Corringham was right, for three weeks later the telegram arrived. This was on a Friday afternoon, and it conveyed no information beyond the fact that St. John would reach Marbeach at 4.17 on the following Wednesday. Corringham, on being told of this, offered to take Hermione to the station to meet her husband, an offer which was eagerly accepted.

The next thing was to tell Alida, and this, Hermione thought, must be done very tactfully. Much as she longed to see St. John she didn't at all look forward to Dr. Mountwell being in the house when he came home. Hermione, without the slightest clue to guide her, had fully persuaded herself of an intrigue between the two. All sorts of hideous possibilities presented themselves to her. St. John might have arranged for her to come to Exton Forcett as his locum so that he would

able to meet her again when he came home. And that Hermione was determined to prevent by every means in her power.

So that evening she approached the subject in her own clumsy manner. "You haven't had a holiday all the time you've been here, Dr Mountwell," she said. "Wouldn't you like to go to London for a day or two to see your parents? It would be a nice change for you."

Alida smiled. She knew, of course, that Dr Cecil was expected, but not that he was to arrive at Foursquare on the following Wednesday. But that Hermione wanted to get her out of his way was ridiculously obvious. "That's a charming idea of yours, Mrs Cecil," she replied. "It's very sweet of you to think of such a thing. But I don't see how I can possibly manage it. I shouldn't like to ask Dr Woodcock or Dr. Rlesborough to take on my work, even for a very few days. I know they're both frightfully busy."

"There would be no need to ask them," said Hermione. "My husband is coming home on Wednesday. I don't know how long he'll be here but he can do the work while he is."

"But how nice for you, Mrs. Cecil!" Alida exclaimed.

"How delighted you'll be to see him again. Of course, I couldn't go away without letting him know. And in any case I shall be so pleased to make his acquaintance. I've never met him, you know. And now I must dash away to the surgery. It's just upon half-past six."

Hermione could find nothing to say until the door had closed behind Alida. And then for several minutes she sat staring in front of her. So that was what they had arranged between them, was it! She was to be given to understand that they had never met! Did they think that she was to be hoodwinked so easily as all that? Their plan was to escape her vigilance by behaving as perfect strangers while she was about. And then, once safely together behind the baize door, with Miss Draper sent out on some excuse... Why, the very fact that they had agreed upon such a ridiculous deception was proof of the existence of guilty intrigue.

Thus Hermione's thoughts, illogical as ever. During the next few days she brooded over them until she worried herself to distraction. She became fully persuaded that St John was coming home to see not her, but the woman he had planted in her house. All her happy anticipations of his return were shattered. What was she to do? She could not sit by complacently and watch their meeting. Would it not be a more

dignified action on her part to go away at once and St John to face the scandal he had created?

But so strong a line was beyond her power to take. resolved to let events take their course. She would meet John just as if nothing had happened. And then, when were alone together, she would put the matter squarely before him. He could take his choice. There could be no room the three of them under the same roof.

Alida was no more than mildly amused by He desire to get her out of the way before her husband's return, and wondered how a woman of her age could be such a fool. Alida had heard a good deal about St John, from the Corringhams and from other sources, and knew very well that he was not the sort of person to lose his head over any young attractive woman he happened to meet. Especially when the woman was acting as his own locum. Diversion he might and Alida, living in Hermione's house, was the last to blame him for that. But he would seek his diversion discreetly, and most certainly not in Exton Forcett.

How would St. John's return to England affect her own position, Alida wondered. It was generally assumed, both at Foursquare and Exton House, that he had been transferred from a hospital abroad to one at home, and Hermione was quite sure that this meant promotion.

But Alida had heard otherwise. Her uncle in the Middle East corresponded regularly with her mother, who had written her an extract from his last letter. "I hope Alida is getting on all right in that locum job I recommended her for. The man whose practice she's looking after is a very good chap, but I'm sorry to say that we're losing him. The truth of the matter is that his medical knowledge is far from up-to-date, and he has made a bit of a mess of one or two cases. So the powers that be have decided that he'd be better at home. They've been quite nice to him about it, but I shouldn't wonder if when he gets back he'll be retired, on the pretext that he is over forty-five."

Alida had smiled as she read this letter. She found no difficulty in believing that Dr Cecil had made a bit of a mess of one or two of his cases. As Dr Wiegler before her, she had seen plenty of evidence of his faulty treatment of patients, at Exton Forcett. If he had gone wrong in these simple cases, what blunders might he not make when confronted by the disabilities of war? But, unlike Wiegler, Alida had kept her discoveries to herself. Now she reasoned that, if Dr

were to be retired, he would naturally return to his practice, and would no longer need the services of a ~~man~~.

She would be sorry, in a way, to leave Exton Forcett. In spite of the inimical atmosphere of Foursquare, she had enjoyed herself there. She liked the people, who almost without exception had been friendly and cheerful, and she liked the place. And there was that ever-to-be-blessed baize door, behind which she could find sanctuary. She might find herself in many less pleasant surroundings, in spite of the absurd but quite harmless antagonism of Mrs Cecil.

Ahida was not the sort of person to disturb herself or other people unnecessarily. In answering her mother's letter she had written that if Dr. Cecil came back to his practice, she would have to look out for another job, but that there was plenty of time for that. She said nothing to any one in the village. Whatever decision might ultimately be made, it was no business of anybody but Dr. Cecil.

It so happened at the time that there was an epidemic of influenza in the village, and Ahida's time was fully occupied. Except for her regular surgery hours, she was almost continually out in the village, and consequently saw very little of Hermione, who was in a state of dithering excitement. The place had to be swept and garnished in preparation for the doctor's arrival, and Hermione rushed about giving contradictory orders. Tom had better tidy up the kitchen garden. No, he could leave that and trim the shrubs bordering the drive. They were the first things Dr. Cecil would see, and they were terribly neglected. Sarah Hawthorne and Mabel must turn the house upside down, especially the little room which St. John called his study, and which had not been used since his departure. Upon Mabel's objecting that the master did not like anything in his room touched, Hermione reluctantly agreed, and turned the energies of her domestic staff into the drawing-room. With the best intentions in the world, she would have contrived to make the house thoroughly uninhabitable.

But Providence interfered with her plans. On the morning of the Wednesday that St. John was expected, Sarah Hawthorne did not turn up. Hermione was in despair. The drawing-room was still dismantled and forlorn, and it must be put straight before lunch. She was struggling with a pair of curtains which had been taken down to be cleaned and now simply wouldn't go back on to its rings, when through the

And then, Hermione knew, her sorely-tried patience come to an end. There would be a scene which would everything. It was hateful, hateful.

The train came in at last, and out of it stepped St. Cecil. Hermione saw him at once, and knew in a flash that he had not changed. A pipe was in his mouth, and a look of humorous surprise in his eyes, as though he were astonished at finding himself once more on this familiar platform. He was in uniform and carrying a suitcase. As Hermione came up to him, his eyes twinkled and he put his disengaged hand round her for a moment. "Hallo, old girl, so here I am," said "It's good to see you again." And at the sound of his voice, affectionate and with the old mocking ring, the shadow of Dr. Mountwell was lifted.

They walked out of the station to the car, where they found Corringham waiting for them. "Good old Mark!" St. Cecil exclaimed. "It was just like you to bring Hermione and her car to meet me. How are things with you?" Sylvia Leonard and every one at the House flourishing?"

"Mrs. Matthews, the cook, has influenza, otherwise well," Corringham replied. "I'm glad to see you looking fit. Jump in. Got any luggage?"

"Only this suitcase. I left my heavy baggage at the station. I don't quite know what they'll do with me yet. There's some talk of my having to go before a board who will decide whether or not I am too old for military service. I shall get all right, of course, for I've never been fitter in my life. Anyhow, I've got a fortnight's leave, and that's all that matters for the moment."

During the drive back to Exton Forcett, St. John asked an infinity of questions. Just the sort of questions Leonard used to ask when he was a boy at school coming home for the holidays, Corringham thought. What had the shooting been like this season? How were the gardens looking? Was there any chance of getting a game of golf or had Marbeach been ploughed up to grow potatoes? And so on and so forth, all the way back to Foursquare. But never a word of Dr. Mountwell or, for that matter, any reference to the practice.

It was twenty minutes to five when they reached F. It was a fine bright afternoon in early February, with the sun above the horizon. Corringham refused Hermione's invitation to come in and have tea. He had promised Sylvia to get as early as he could, as the rector and Mrs. Laverock were coming over. So Hermione and St. John were left.

have tea together. As might have been expected, they found plenty of things to talk about, domestic and financial. Hermione had been able to manage so far, but she hadn't been able to save very much. Her investments weren't bringing in so much as they used to, and with this terrible Income Tax things were very difficult. And then there was Roland, who couldn't be expected to live on his pay. He had to be helped, of course. Oh and another thing. Tom Docking was asking for an increase in his wages. He said that the men employed at the House had been given a rise, and he didn't see why he shouldn't have one too. Hermione had told him that she would ask Dr. Cecil about it when he came home. What did St. John think ought to be done? Tom would have gone home by now, but he was sure to ask about it again to-morrow. And Hermione couldn't possibly run the house with only Mabel. If Sarah Hawthorne was going to let her down like this she would have to find someone to take her place. She really couldn't think of anybody except Mrs. Foxcroft.

St. John, who hated this sort of detail, and had always avoided it whenever possible, listened good-naturedly. He thought that Hermione had aged noticeably since he had seen her last, but apart from that she had not changed in the least. Her mind was still occupied with trifles, which could be of no possible interest to any one but herself. He got out of his chair and yawned. "Plenty of time to think about all that sort of thing," he said. "I'm going to have a look round the place while there's still enough light to see. Coming with me?"

"My dear, I can't possibly!" Hermione exclaimed. "You don't know what a terrible lot of things I have to do nowadays. Mabel is very good, but she is frightfully slow, and she'd never get through her work if I didn't help her. I must clear away the tea-things, and I always do some of the blacking-out. Then I really must go down the village and see Mrs. Foxcroft. She doesn't mind going out to help sometimes and I'm sure she'd come here for an hour or two in the morning, especially if I tell her that you're at home."

This was at half-past five, with the sun on the point of setting in a cloudless sky. The temperature was below freezing-point, and St. John, fresh from a warm climate, put on his greatcoat before he went out. He took his favourite walking-stick, a heavy ash with a knobbed end, and set off across the lawn. Hermione watched him go. "Mind you don't take cold, dear," she said, then she went about her own business.

At a quarter-past six Eileen Draper was at work in dispensary. The internal arrangement of the annexe was as follows. Entering by the outer door, known as the patients' or surgery entrance, one found oneself in a hall, in which were half a dozen wooden chairs and a couple of benches. It was used as a waiting-room and at the farther end was the baize door, beyond which was the main body of the house. On the right-hand side of the hall was the door of the surgery, on the left that of the dispensary. A staircase leading out of the hall rose to the floor above, on which were Eileen's sitting-room and bedroom. All the windows in the annexe looked out over the yard, but it was now past black-out time, and these windows were covered with frames and curtains.

Eileen was working at the bench, on which were the scales, measures, and other dispensary apparatus. In front of her was a row of bottles, and beside her a sheet of paper bearing names with a prescription under each. Alida, unlike most doctors, wrote a legible hand, and there was no difficulty in deciphering it. As Eileen worked through the list, she heard the well-known creak of the baize door, followed by a masculine footstep. She looked round as the door opened. "Roland!" she exclaimed, hastily putting down the measure she was holding. "You never told me you were coming home. Oh, do be careful! That's all the tincture of quinine we've got."

"I didn't know myself till this morning," Roland said as he released her. "I've applied for compassionate leave to meet father. Played the affectionate parent and the dutiful son for all they're worth. And I heard this morning that I could have twenty-four hours."

"Only twenty-four hours? Then I shan't see much of you. But however did you get here?"

"By good luck more than anything else. I got to Marbeach Station half an hour ago, and one of the porters who's an old friend of mine told me that father had arrived by the 4.17, that mother had met him and that they had driven off in Sir Mark's car. I couldn't get a taxi so I started to walk, but I hadn't gone very far before the driver of a passing lorry drew up and asked me where I was bound for. I told him, and he said that he was passing through the village and would give me a lift. He set me down at the lodge gate, and here I am. But where is everybody? I came in by the front way, but the house seems empty."

"I don't know, I'm sure," Eileen replied. "I haven't been in more than a few minutes myself. Dr. Mountwell asked me

to run round on my bicycle and deliver some of the medicines. We've got a 'flu epidemic on, and we're awfully busy."

"What's Dr. Mountwell like?" Roland asked. "Do you get on with her all right?"

"She's a darling!" Eileen admitted. "Quite young, so pretty and awfully nice. I shall be horribly jealous if you make eyes at her. Now you really must let me get on with my work. I haven't half-finished making up the medicines and the patients will be here for them at half-past six. It's almost that now."

Roland was amazed at Eileen's description of Dr. Mountwell, which differed so entirely from the picture he had compiled from the very brief references to her in his mother's letters. But he said nothing, and obediently took his departure. He knew very well that Dr. Mountwell might turn up at any moment as her surgery hour was approaching. And he was not particularly anxious to be found in the dispensary talking to Eileen.

So Eileen went on with her work, dispensing the medicines according to Alida's list of prescriptions, and putting a label on each bottle as she did so. The dispensary door was open, and as she worked, deftly and swiftly, she listened for Alida's footstep. But, by the time half-past six came, she had not arrived. Other footsteps became audible, however, accompanied by the opening and shutting of the outer door. Then a shuffling in the hall, followed by a knock on the dispensary door.

"Come in!" Eileen called out. "Good-morning, Mr. Leader. You've called for Mrs. Leader's medicine. Here it is, all ready. How's she getting on?"

"Nicely, miss, thank you," Jim Leader replied as he put the bottle in the pocket of his overcoat. "The doctor saw her this morning, and said she was through the worst of it. But she'll have to lie in bed for a bit and keep warm. Well, I must be getting away. It's a nice bright evening, with a full moon just rising, so I'll see my way home all right. Good-night, miss."

Jim Leader's visit was followed by several others, mostly people calling for medicine. With these Eileen was able to deal, but among them were one or two who had called to see the doctor, and these she told to wait in the hall. There was nothing unusual in Alida's being a little late for her surgery hour. During the past fortnight the epidemic had kept her so busy that she could not always get back exactly on time.

But by seven o'clock the hall was getting uncomfortably crowded and there was still no sign of Alida. She had never been so late as this, and it occurred to Eileen that she must have come home, and was now in the house talking to Dr. Cecil. Eileen hoped she would put in an appearance soon, for young Mrs. Sambourne had brought in her youngest baby, who didn't look at all too good. After a few minutes Eileen decided that Alida ought to be told.

She passed through the baize doorway into the main part of the house. The drawing-room door was ajar, and she could hear voices from within. Dr. Cecil's loud and hearty, but not Alida's. Eileen walked in, to find four people in the room, Dr. and Mrs. Cecil, Roland, and the rector who had looked in to welcome St. John on his return. St. John jumped out of his chair as she came in, and laid his hands paternally on her shoulders. "By Jove, Eileen, you look fine and bonny!" he exclaimed. "I'd have come through to see you, but I know that you and Dr. Mountwell would be busy at this time. So you've come to see me instead. Well, that's what I call really nice of you."

"I'm delighted to see you home again, Dr. Cecil," Eileen replied demurely. Then, with a side glance in Roland's direction, "And you, too, Mr. Cecil. Good-evening, Mr. Laverock. I just came in to see if Dr. Mountwell had come back yet. There are several patients waiting to see her, and one case I don't quite like the look of. Mrs. Sambourne's baby."

"Good heavens!" St. John exclaimed. "Has Mrs. Sambourne got yet another baby? The birth-rate won't be in any danger so long as she keeps on like that. You've got an influenza epidemic to cope with, I hear. I expect Dr. Mountwell has been delayed somewhere."

"I saw Dr. Mountwell not so long ago," said the rector. "My wife and I were at Exton House this afternoon, and she came in while we were there to see Mrs. Matthews and have a cup of tea. It must have been a little before five when she left."

"Well, there you are!" St. John exclaimed. "Stopping to have a cup of tea delayed her. I tell you what, Eileen. I'll come through to the surgery and if Dr. Mountwell isn't there I'll have a look at the Sambourne baby. It's a bit unprofessional, I suppose, but I dare say Dr. Mountwell won't mind. You'll excuse me, won't you, Laverock?"

Alida had not returned, and St. John had quite an ovation

from the waiting patients. They were genuinely glad to see him, for much as they had taken to Alida, most of them had known him all their lives. He examined the baby, and gave Mrs Sambourne instructions what to do about it. Then he turned to the rest, dealing out cheerful words and rule-of-thumb treatment. As one of the older men said to him, it was just like old times.

It was a quarter to eight by the time the surgery hour ended, with still no sign of Alida. But, in the excitement of the double homecoming, nobody had any thought to spare for her. The rector, feeling that he had done his duty in welcoming St John back, had gone home to his dinner. St John and Roland could hardly be expected to show much interest in the concerns of a locum they had never met. Eileen's mind was concentrated solely upon Roland. And Hermione, overwhelmed by having both her husband and her son about her, had only one care in the world. Would the pheasant go round? The only alternative was a tin of stewed steak, and that was so terribly extravagant in points.

As events turned out dinner was a great success. There were four present. St. John, Hermione, Roland and Eileen. Alida's chair remained untenanted and unremarked, save for a comment by St John that Dr Mountwell must have been delayed by a difficult case. To which Hermione replied shortly that Mabel would keep something hot for her. The pheasant had been hung to the hour, and was beautifully cooked. St John, carving at the head of his own table, saw to it that there was enough for everybody. And the Welsh rarebit following it was a triumph.

They were still lingering over some apples which Hermione had contrived to keep from the preceding autumn, when Mabel appeared in the doorway. "Beg pardon, sir," she said, addressing St John. "But Mr. Tipping is here and would like to see you. 'It's urgent, he says'."

"Mr Tipping?" St. John replied, searching his memory, which had grown a trifle rusty in his absence, for the name. "Oh, Bob Tipping, you mean. All right, I'll see him."

He flung his napkin aside, rose from his chair and left the room.

CHAPTER NINE

AS FAR as Mr Olliver of Folly Farm was concerned, that same Wednesday seemed to be one of those days when everything goes wrong. To begin with, his man Robin reported that the pump in the yard, used to fill the troughs from which the bullocks drank, wouldn't work. On inspecting it, Mr. Olliver discovered that one of the valves was broken and would have to be replaced. Then, just before dinner-time his daughter Marjorie, a strong upstanding girl of twenty-five or so, capable of as much work on the farm as any man, was seized with shivering fits and violent pains in the head. It was evident that she had caught the prevailing complaint, and her mother packed her off to bed. And then, when having had his dinner he mounted his bicycle to ride into the village, the chain broke.

The one horse which would go into the trap was a trifle lame, so the only course left to Mr Olliver was to walk. Folly Farm was almost a mile from the centre of the village, the way to which was by the lane running alongside the wall of Foursquare. Mr Olliver trudged along this lane until he reached the corner, where there was a pillar-box. Here he turned sharply left into the main road and so reached the yard gateway of Foursquare, leading to the surgery door. By this time it was half-past two.

He saw Alida, who promised to call at Folly Farm that afternoon. She explained that they mustn't expect her very early, as she had several other calls to make first. Meanwhile, the patient should be given a couple of aspirins and kept warm.

From Foursquare Mr Olliver went on to the policeman's house where he inquired for Bob Tipping. But Mrs Foxcroft, who answered the door to him, shook her head. Bob was out, over at Quenbies, repairing a cistern for Mrs Burwash, and it would likely be a long job. Mr Olliver left a message for Bob, asking him to run along to Folly Farm as soon as he got back. Then, after calling at the shop to buy some aspirins, he returned home.

Bob Tipping, on his bicycle and carrying a bag of tools, arrived at Folly Farm about five o'clock. Mr Olliver took him to the pump, which he proceeded to dismantle. "That's proper bad, that is," he said as he extracted the defective valve. "Broken right across. I've never seen one go that way before. I'll have to send for a new valve to make a job of it. And it may be a week or more before I get one."

"And what about my bullocks while I'm waiting?" Mr Olliver demanded. "I can't fill the troughs without the pump, unless I carry the water from the pond in the five-acre meadow. And likely that'll freeze up any time now! 'Tis cold enough"

"Well, I dunno," Bob replied. "I might be able to fix it up after a fashion until the new valve comes. I'll set to work and try, anyhow." He was successful in effecting temporary repairs to the pump, but by the time he had finished it was after six, and getting dark. But Mr Olliver, having got him on the spot, was loath to let him go. "You might have a look at that old bike of mine," he said. "The chain's broke and wants mending, and I fancy the back tyre wants seeing to, for it doesn't seem to hold the air properly. It's in the shed and I can bring you a lamp in there to see by."

Bob, always ready to oblige, allowed himself to be persuaded. He set to work on the bicycle, which was a scarred and battered veteran. By the time he had remended the chain, repaired the tyre, and tightened up the ominously rattling mudguards, it was after seven o'clock. Mr Olliver insisted on taking him into the kitchen for a bit of bread and cheese and a glass or so of the famous Folly Farm cider. He learnt in the course of conversation with Mrs Olliver that Marjorie was resting nice and quiet. Dr. Mountwell had been and wasn't long-gone. She had said that Marjorie was to be kept warm, and that they were to send round in the morning for a bottle of medicine for her. And as Bob was here, would he put a rivet in the handle of the iron kettle. The dratted thing was near falling off.

It was nearly half-past eight by the time that Bob at last got away from Folly Farm. He remounted his bicycle and started to ride homewards, feeling merry and elated from the cider he had drunk. Good stuff, cider. Just the thing to keep away this blessed 'flu that was hanging around. It was a lovely night, too, a bit frostified perhaps but with a full moon shining as bright as day. He wouldn't go straight home. He'd call in first at the White Bull, where maybe he'd find someone to give him a game of darts.

Such were Bob's thoughts as he rode not too steadily along the lane. Just before he reached the wall encircling the grounds of Foursquare, his wheel slipped into a rut, and he very nearly fell off his bicycle. He'd have to take more care where he was going, for the lane had been allowed to get into a terrible state. However, running alongside the wall was a

narrow footpath, smooth compared with the rutted surface of the lane. If he kept on that he'd be all right. But it was queer how the old bike seemed to wobble like

Whistling discordantly and steering a somewhat uncertain course, Bob rode along the path, keeping as near the wall as he could without touching it. He was nearly half-way between the beginning of the wall and the pillar-box at the corner where the lane joined the main road, when he saw something lying on the path ahead of him. He thought at first that it was the branch of a tree fallen there. But as he approached closer he saw that it was nothing of the kind. It was someone lying on the ground, curled up and seemingly asleep.

Bob's brain was still slightly under the influence of the cider, and his first sentiment was one of indignation. People shouldn't lie about the roads like that. If any one were to ride into them they'd get a nasty fall. Bob dismounted from his bicycle, and, still whistling, walked up to the huddled form and bent over it. The discordant whistle died on his lips. For the form was that of Dr. Mountwell, and where her head lay was a pool of blood.

Bob stood there for a moment, appalled, paralysed in every limb, wondering what on earth he should do. He could mend most things, but not the human body. Dr. Mountwell lay still and motionless, showing no sign of life. This was a job for more skilful hands than his own. After a second or two his power of movement returned. He mounted his bicycle and pedalled furiously, round the corner where the pillar-box was, and through the village until he reached his brother-in-law's house.

Foxcroft was sitting in front of the kitchen fire, reading a newspaper in his shirt sleeves. He looked up at Bob's abrupt entrance and stared at him. "Why, whatever's come over you?" he asked. "You look all scared. Have you met a ghost or something?"

Bob stood there with chattering teeth. The combined effects of the cider and of what he had seen had completely unnerved him. "Dr. Mountwell——" he managed to stammer. "She's had an accident. Lying there in Folly Farm Lane. Nearly ran over her, I did."

Foxcroft rose to his feet, instinctively reaching for the tunic that hung on a peg nearby. "It's my belief you've been on the booze," he said severely. "Now, what's all this? You say that Dr. Mountwell has met with an accident? You didn't knock her over yourself, did you?"

Bob struggled to pull himself together "I've only had a couple of glasses of cider that Mr. Ollrver gave me, straight I have. And Dr Mountwell was lying there in the lane as I was on my way back Under the wall, not far from the corner. And she's hurt, for there's a lot of blood lying around It gave me such a turn, I——"

"Never mind about that," Foxcroft interrupted him "I'll go along there with the stretcher and see what's to be done And you listen to me Hop along on your bike to the doctor's house and ask for Dr Cecil I know he's home, for Mrs Cecil told the missus so this evening Tell him what's happened, and bring him along to the place You'll be useful to bear a hand with the stretcher Get along, there's no time to be wasted"

Bob, whose head was gradually clearing, obeyed him He rode his bicycle to Foursquare and, entering by the yard gate, reached the back door Mabel opened it to him "Why, Mr. Tipping, whatever's the matter?" she asked, seeing his scared face in the bright moonlight.

"There's been an accident, miss," Bob replied. "And my brother-in-law told me to come round and fetch Dr Cecil He's come home, he says."

"Yes, he's home," said Mabel "You'd best come inside Wait here while I tell him you've come."

St John shortly appeared in the back passage. "Hallo, Bob!" he exclaimed heartily. "I'm very glad to see you again after all this time. What can I do for you?"

This time Bob told his story more coherently He had found Dr Mountwell lying in the lane; obviously badly hurt He had told his brother-in-law, who had sent him to fetch Dr Cecil and take him to the place. Foxcroft had already started for there with the stretcher.

"I'll come at once," St John replied. They went out by the back door. "Wait a minute while I fetch a few things from the surgery" He entered the annexe by the patients' door There was nobody about, for Eileen was still in the dining-room. He collected a few instruments and bandages, then rejoined Bob They set off together, along the road to the corner, and so down the lane to the spot where Dr. Mountwell lay

Foxcroft had got there before them, and he nodded curtly in reply to St. John's greeting "Bad business, I'm afraid, Doctor," he said "But you'll know best when you've had a look at the poor lady."

As St John knelt down, Foxcroft and Bob stood in the lane

watching him. There was no need of the policeman's torch, for the full moon shone from an unclouded sky. Alida lay close against the wall, as though she had fallen as she walked along the footpath. She was wearing the dress she was in the habit of wearing when on her rounds, a tweed coat and skirt, a small felt hat and a pair of strong leather-soled shoes. Beside her was the leather attaché-case she always carried, containing her stethoscope and other medical apparatus. And in the lane nearby there was an envelope, conspicuously white in the moonlight.

"You're right, Foxcroft, this is a shocking bad business," said St. John, rising to his feet. "The poor girl's dead, I'm sorry to say. You're quite sure that she is Dr. Mountwell, of course?"

"It's Dr. Mountwell, right enough," Foxcroft replied. "What makes you doubt it, Doctor?"

"I don't doubt it," St. John replied. "I've never seen her before, that's all. I can't imagine how this can have happened. Something must have fallen on her from above. The top of her head is all crushed in."

Foxcroft looked up towards the unclouded sky. But there was nothing in that direction to suggest what might have fallen. For some days past there had been no aerial activity whatever. At this particular spot, there were no trees overhanging the lane, which was bounded by the wall on one hand and a low quick-set hedge on the other. "It's a rum go," he said. "I'm more than sorry this should have happened, for I've liked the lady ever since she first came here. But being sorry won't mend matters. We'd best get the poor lady's body to the mortuary."

"You've got a mortuary here, then, since I've been away?" St. John asked.

"Well, it isn't properly a mortuary," Foxcroft returned. "But the A R P people thought we ought to have somewhere to put bodies in case the place should be blitzed, so Sir Mark let them have one of his loose-boxes. That's where we took Dr. Wiegler after we'd found him. This is the second fatal accident that's happened to the people who've taken your place, Doctor."

"You can't expect me to know anything about it," said St. John, struck by the curious significance of Foxcroft's tone. "I only got here this afternoon. How are you going to get the body to Exton House? It'll be the deuce of a job to carry it all that way on the stretcher."

"We'll soon fix that," Foxcroft replied. "Bob here's got a handcart that he uses for his tools and things, and we can lay the stretcher on that. Slip up and get it, Bob. And while you're there, ask your sister to ring up Sir Mark. Tell her to ask him if he'd mind having the mortuary unlocked, as there's been an accident and we're bringing a body along. Sharp, now!"

As Bob went off Foxcroft began his investigations. He picked up the attaché-case and looked into it. Then he picked up the envelope. It was an unposted letter addressed to Mrs. Mountwell, 42 Buckenham Mansions, London, W 2. Thus he put into his pocket. Then he began to look for anything that might have fallen from above. There were several large stones scattered about the lane, evidently put there for the purpose of filling up the ruts. But none of these was loose. They were all firmly embedded in the frozen ground. The path on which the body lay was hard and smooth, with here and there a thin coating of ice. It was possible that Dr. Mountwell might have slipped and fallen. But would that have resulted in an injury to the top of the head?

After some little while Foxcroft approached the body once more. He said nothing to St. John, who stood watching him in gloomy silence. Taking a piece of chalk from his pocket he made two marks on the wall, one in line with each extremity of the body as it lay on the ground. These he supplemented by a series of careful measurements. He was determined that Sergeant Briston should have no fault to find with him for leaving anything undone. He was making notes, with his note-book resting against the wall so that the moon should shine full upon it, when Bob returned with the handcart. Between the three of them they put the body on the stretcher, then lifted this on to the cart. This done they started off for Exton House.

It was by now half-past nine, and freezing fairly hard. There was nobody about the village, and they reached their destination without incident. Sir Mark, who had received Mrs. Foxcroft's message, was waiting for them at the door of the improvised mortuary, which had been fitted with a trestle-table and electric light. "Who is it?" he asked quickly, as the body hidden by the stretcher cover was deposited.

"Foxcroft tells me it's my locum," St. John replied. "I'm going to make a rather more extensive examination than I've been able to do so far. I'll be with you in half an hour or so."

Corringham, Foxcroft and Bob came out of the loose-box,

closing the door behind them to comply with black-out regulations Bob was bidden to take himself off with his handcart, and proceeded to do so. Then Corringham turned to Foxcroft "What does this mean?" he asked steadily.

"I wish I knew, sir," Foxcroft replied. "It's Dr Mountwell, there isn't any doubt about that. Bob found her in Folly Farm lane on the footpath that runs alongside the wall of Foursquare. And Dr Cecil says the top of her head is broken in. I don't like the look of it at all, sir."

Corringham considered this information for a second or two. "I don't like the look of it, either," he said slowly. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to ring up the sergeant and hear what's he's got to say about it, sir. And I'll go home and do that now, if you'll excuse me."

Corringham, left alone, re-entered the house. With heavy footsteps he made his way to the library where he and Lady Corringham had been sitting after dinner. She was still there, reclining in an arm-chair by the fire, a reading-lamp on a table nearby casting a soft light on her handsome face and silver hair. She laid her book down as her husband came into the room. "Who was it, dear?" she asked. "Any one we know?"

Corringham seated himself wearily on the arm of her chair and put his hand affectionately on her knee. "It was Alida," he replied quietly.

"Alida!" Lady Corringham exclaimed. "You mean that she's dead? How awful! However did it happen? Was she run over? The message said there'd been an accident."

Corringham shook his head. "I don't know. I haven't heard the details yet. Bob Tipping found her in Folly Farm lane, St John's in there with her now. He's sure to come in here when he comes out. And I shan't know what to say to him." He got up abruptly and stood with his hands and elbows on the mantelpiece, staring into the fire. "So Merrion was right, after all," he said in a curiously level voice.

"What did Captain Merrion say?" Lady Corringham asked.

"He said that he had no doubt that Wiegler had been murdered. And from that day to this I've been trying to convince myself that he was wrong. Well, it's no use trying any longer. Nobody's going to believe that two of St. John's locums were killed accidentally, one after the other. It's the most horrible situation that I've ever come across."

"Mark! What are you talking about?" Lady Corringham exclaimed. "Are you trying to break it to me that Alida was murdered? You can't mean anything so ghastly."

Corringham kicked the logs in the fireplace so that they crackled sharply. A sudden flame shot up, lighting up his face, which looked strangely old and careworn. "I don't know," he replied. "It'll be a matter for the police and the coroner. Foxcroft has gone home to ring up Sergeant Briston. They won't take things so easily this time."

"But who could have murdered her?" Lady Corringham objected. "Nobody in the village, she was far too popular. Some stranger, who met her, an unprotected woman, in the dark?"

"It isn't dark to-night, it's bright moonlight. And what stranger would be lurking in Folly Farm Lane? First Wiegler, then Alida. Wiegler's case one might understand. There were very few people in the place who had any love for him. But Alida, as you say, was as much liked as he was hated." Corringham dropped his voice: "Except by one person we know," he added.

"Hermione?" Lady Corringham asked in a shocked voice.

"Mark! Whatever is the matter with you to-night? Why do you say such awful things?"

"I shouldn't say them to any one but you, my dear. But I can't help anticipating the questions the police will ask if they have any reason to suspect foul play. And they'll ask you and me, you must realise that. Don't you see what an appalling thing this is going to be for St. John? I wish I knew what was the best thing to be done?"

Corringham stood there for a couple of minutes or more, while the flame died down, leaving his face in darkness. "I wonder," he muttered at last thoughtfully. "Leonard will have to be told, of course. I only hope that he won't take it too hardly, poor boy. He's never said anything to me, but since they met I've often thought—Oh, well, that's all over now. I'll ring him up. He's pretty sure to be at his rooms now. And I shall ask him if he can put me in touch with Merrion. He's the man to help if any one can."

Leonard was at home, and Corringham broke the news to him as gently as such a thing is possible on the telephone. "That's the worst thing I've heard," Leonard replied after a long silence. "Far worse than when they told me they'd have to take my leg off. It was good of you to let me know at once, Admiral. I'd far rather have heard it from you

than from any one else Fate does play rotten tricks, doesn't it?"

"We're both most frightfully sorry, old chap," said Corringham. "Come home and see us as soon as you can." And now, one thing more. Do you know how I can get in touch with Merrion?"

"Why, yes, I think so," Leonard replied. "He's not in town just now, for he does a good deal of his work at his own house, which is at a place called High Eldersham. It's not such a very long way from Exton Forcett as the crow flies. You can ring him up there, if you like. High Eldersham double one."

His conversation with Leonard finished, Corringham put a trunk call through to Merrion's number. The operator promised to ring him up when the connection was made. He was about to return to the library, when St John came in rubbing his hands and stamping his feet. "By Jove, it's cold in that loose-box of yours!" he exclaimed. "I thought I'd look in for a moment, but I can't stop, for I must get home. They'll be wondering what's become of me. You know that Roland's home, I daresay."

"What's that?" Corringham replied. "Roland home? When did he arrive?"

"This afternoon, quite unexpectedly. Got twenty-four hours leave on the plea of filial longing to see his father. Trust these young fellows to wangle anything. But this is an infernal nuisance about Dr. Mountwell. I'd looked forward to at least a week in which to rest and enjoy myself. And now I shall have to take over the practice in the middle of this influenza epidemic. It does seem a bit hard, doesn't it?"

But this was more than Corringham could bear. "I'm sorry, St John, but I'm expecting a very important trunk call," he said sharply. "It's on a particularly confidential matter. Do you mind?"

St John took the hint at once. "Of course not, I must get back in any case. I've a lot of things to talk about to Roland and I shan't have another opportunity, for he'll have to be off in the morning. Give my love to Sylvia, and tell her that I'll look in and see her as soon as I can. Good-night."

He went out, and Corringham rejoined his wife in the library. "That was St John," he said. "I didn't bring him in here, because I knew he'd get on both our nerves. All he says about Alida's death is that it is an infernal nuisance, because he'll have to do the work."

"Sit down, Mark, and be reasonable," Lady Corringham

"You can't expect St. John to look at it as we do. to him was only a stray individual who happened to possess the necessary qualifications to be able to come here as his locum. They had never met, Alida told me that herself. The arrangements were made through an uncle of hers who was working in the same hospital as St. John."

"That may be," Corringham replied. "But he might have shown at least a decent sorrow. He's bone selfish, that's what's the matter with him. Ah, that's my call."

He hurried out of the room to answer the telephone. "Your High Eldersham call," said a voice. "Are you there, High Eldersham?" A pause and a faint creaking sound, then another voice, female and alarmingly businesslike. "This is High Eldersham double one. Who is that, please?"

"Sir Mark Corringham, from Exton Forcett. Can I speak to Captain Merrion, please?"

"I will ask," the voice replied. "Will you hold on a minute?" A short pause, then the voice again. "I am putting you through to Captain Merrion." Then, "This is Merrion speaking. Is that you, Corringham? Good-evening, all's well with you, I hope?"

"No, it isn't," Corringham replied. "I'm awfully sorry to disturb you like this, Merrion, but there's a sea of trouble here. I won't go into details over the telephone. There's been another fatal accident. Dr. Mountwell, the locum who took Wiegler's place. And to be quite candid, I'm frightened to death at what may happen. Things look just about as ugly as they can. I suppose it would be quite impossible for you to come over here? I'd value your opinion more than anybody's."

"Nothing's impossible," Merrion replied cheerfully. "If nothing crops up during the night to prevent me, I will leave here after breakfast and I shall be with you before lunch. I'll come by car, so that I can get back quickly if I'm wanted. Will that do?"

"I should rather think it would!" Corringham exclaimed. "I'll tell you just how grateful I am when we meet. Good-night, and ever so many thanks."

If Corringham was concerned over the manner of Alida's death Foxcroft was scarcely less so. Although he had not had the benefit of Merrion's observations, he had never been quite satisfied that Dr. Wiegler's death was accidental. And now this second remarkable accident seemed to confirm his suspicions. The sooner the sergeant came over and had a look at things, the better. It was for him to say what was to be done.

On his way homewards from Exton House he overtook Bob Tipping pushing his handcart, and cross-questioned him severely. But Bob had very little to add to his original story. He had been at Folly Farm, doing a few jobs for Mr. Olliver. While he was there, he heard that Dr Mountwell had been to see Marjorie Olliver, who had gone down with 'flu. As he had been cycling back along the lane he had seen something on the footpath ahead of him, and that was all. It was quite true that Mr Olliver had given him a couple of glasses of cider, which had made him feel a bit queer when he got out in the fresh air after the hot kitchen. But he hadn't been in any way sozzled, that he'd swear to.

As soon as he got home, Foxcroft rang up the sergeant, and gave him the facts briefly. "I don't like the look of it, Sergeant," he concluded. "It isn't like that affair of Dr. Wiegler. There wasn't a gravel-pit to fall into this time."

"What do you mean?" Sergeant Briston demanded.

"I mean that people don't always get their heads bashed in by accident," Foxcroft replied. "I've got my own ideas, and I'd like you to come over and see for yourself, Sergeant."

"All right, I'll come. But heaven help you if you've dragged me out at this time of night for nothing. Not far from the pillar-box at the corner of the road, you say? Very well. I'll meet you there in half an hour's time."

It was eleven o'clock when Briston kept his appointment. The moon was still shining brightly, but a cold breeze had blown up from the eastward, and a dark bank of cloud had appeared on the horizon. There was obviously no time to be wasted before the moon was obscured. Foxcroft took the sergeant to the spot where the body had lain, described its position and pointed out the chalk marks he had made on the wall.

"Now this is how I see it, Sergeant," he said. "Dr Mountwell had been to Folly Farm and was on her way back to Foursquare. There are two ways she might have come. This way, along the lane, into the main road at the corner, and so to either of the gates. The other way is a good bit shorter. Across a couple of fields, where there's a footpath, and so out on to the green, where those three or four cottages stand. From the green there's a bit of a track leading on to the main road at the far side of the Foursquare grounds. She might have taken that and come to the gates the other way round. It's pretty miry that way in wet weather, but it would be hard enough on a frosty evening like this."

"If, if you found her here, she didn't come that way," Briston remarked.

"No, she didn't. And why didn't she, as it was the shortest? Because she wanted to post a letter in the pillar-box, see? I found the letter lying on the ground, and I picked it up, that's how I know. She must have been carrying it in her hand when she was hit."

"That's all very well," said Briston impatiently. "But what was it hit her? That's what we want to know. You told me on the telephone you'd got your own ideas."

"And so I have," Foxcroft replied. "You see that bit of wall where the chalk marks are? Well, as I was telling you just now, that's where she lay. Close against the wall, as if she'd been walking on the footpath, as she naturally would. If you stand against the wall just there, Sergeant, you'll find you can't look over the top."

"I can see that without standing there," said Briston. "That wall must be seven feet high if it's an inch."

"So it is, from this side," Foxcroft agreed. "But on the other side the ground is a lot higher. I don't suppose the wall's much more than four or five feet high there. And Dr. Mountwell's injuries are right on top of her head, remember that."

As the meaning of this dawned upon Briston he whistled softly. "Someone leaning over the wall, eh? What's on the other side of it?"

"Dr. Cecil's paddock," Foxcroft replied. "And between the paddock and the wall there's a path running. Right round the place it goes, close inside the wall. Mind you, I don't say there was anybody on that path when Dr. Mountwell was passing here."

"But if anybody was on the path?" Briston asked. "Your idea is that they leaned over the wall and clouted the poor lady on the head. That's it, isn't it?"

"It might have happened, anyhow," Foxcroft replied. "I don't see any other way to account for it. It looks to me as if she must have been hit on the head by someone, for there's nothing that could have fallen on her. And if she'd slipped and fallen, she wouldn't have landed on the top of her head."

There was obviously something in Foxcroft's idea. Briston wheeled his motor-cycle against the wall, and climbed on to the saddle. Standing on this he was able to look over. The path inside the wall, considerably higher than the level of the lane, was as Foxcroft had described it. He had only time for a

rapid glance, for while he was still perched precariously on the saddle, the clouds swept up over the moon and in an instant the scene was plunged in darkness.

"That's finished it for to-night," he remarked, as with Foxcroft's assistance he regained the solid ground "I'll have to speak to the Super about this. I'll ring him up from your house, and see what he says. Looks to me as if there's been some dirty work."

The superintendent, having been informed of the facts, took the view that there must have been some very dirty work indeed. But, privately, he doubted whether Briston was competent to discover the perpetrator of this. The ultimate result of a consultation between him and the chief constable of the county was a request to Scotland Yard that an officer of the C.I.D. should be sent to Exton Forcett as soon as possible.

CHAPTER TEN

TO CORRINGHAM'S unbounded relief, Merrion arrived at Exton House shortly before noon on the following morning. His host hurried him into the library, and set him down before the fire. "I can't tell you how grateful I am to you for coming at such short notice," he said. "Things have turned out very much as I expected, they would. The local police were here an hour ago. Sergeant Briston from Marbeach and the local man, Foxcroft. You remember them. They wouldn't say much, for they're expecting a chap from Scotland Yard. But I gather that they've made up their minds that Alida was murdered, and they say they've found a clue as to who did it."

Merrion smiled faintly. "I know nothing beyond what you told me over the telephone last night," he replied. "Who is this Alida you speak of?"

"I'm so sorry. Alida is Dr. Mountwell's Christian name. My wife and I were very fond of her, and always spoke of her as Alida. She was found yesterday evening with fatal injuries to the top of her head. And after your explanation of how poor Wiegler was killed, I felt that you were the very person to unravel the whole horrible business."

"Well, I don't know about that," said Merrion doubtfully.

"From what you tell me, the police seem pretty well on the job already. I gather that Dr. Mountwell succeeded Dr. Wiegler as locum for the regular practitioner here, who is

abroad somewhere. I don't want to appear flippant, are we to assume that there is someone here whose hobby is killing locusts? If you don't mind my saying so, it doesn't seem altogether probable."

"It isn't," Corringham replied. "It's far worse than that, I'm afraid. And Dr Cecil is no longer abroad. He came home yesterday afternoon, as did his son Roland, who came out shooting with us that Saturday afternoon."

"I remember," said Merrion thoughtfully. "You had ideas about the boy then. I won't ask you if you have any fresh ideas about him now. In my experience it's no good trying to solve a puzzle of this kind until one's in full possession of all the facts. Obviously you believe there is some connection between the death of these two people. That being so, we had better begin with the first one. Has anything cropped up now which might throw any fresh light on that?"

Corringham hesitated. "I'm not sure," he replied. "Wiegler's heir turned up a little while back. A most unpleasant red-headed bounder, by name Kingsbury. Gunthorpe, a friend of mine who was acting as Mrs Cecil's legal adviser in the affair, brought him here on one occasion. It appears that Wiegler, who seems to have had no relations, made Kingsbury his heir out of gratitude. But Kingsbury declares that he had no knowledge that he had done so. That may or may not be true. There's no means of proving it."

"If untrue, it suggests a possible motive on Kingsbury's part," said Merrion. "Apart from that, is there anything to connect him with Wiegler's death?"

"Well, that's just it," Corringham replied. "You told me that you know something about little villages like this, and consequently you must be well aware that it doesn't do to place much reliance on the rumours and reports you hear in them. But there was a certain curious report about a red-headed stranger. And this report was flying about long before Kingsbury turned up to claim his inheritance."

"That might be interesting if there were any substance in the report," Merrion remarked.

"I'll tell you. There's a man here called Bert Hawthorne. He met with a serious accident some years ago, as the result of which he lost the use of his legs, and can now only get around in a wheel-chair. As of course he can't do very much, he spends his time wheeling himself about the village. Talking to people and watching everything that goes on. I don't think much happens here without Bert Hawthorne's knowledge."

"Well, it seems that he saw something on the afternoon of Wiegler's death. I haven't had the story from his own lips, for, to tell the truth, I've been trying to forget about that incident. But this, briefly, is what has come to my ears. That afternoon Bert was out as usual in his chair. He wheeled himself to a sunny spot on the road from here to Marbeach, near the end of the lane, or rather track, leading into Gallows Wood. Whilst he was there he saw a red-haired stranger go up the track, and after a while come back again, holding what looked to him like a packet of picture postcards."

"Did any one besides Bert Hawthorne see this man?" Merrion asked.

"Not that I'm aware of. But it doesn't necessarily follow from that that Bert invented or imagined him. Bert told Foxcroft, but Sergeant Briston, who was convinced that Wiegler's death was accidental, didn't attach any importance to his statement. In consequence, no serious inquiries were ever made about this stranger."

"I told you that Kingsbury came here a month or so after Wiegler's death. I walked with him and Gunthorpe to Four-square and on the way there we passed Bert in his chair. I purposely stopped and spoke to him. I wanted him to notice Kingsbury without knowing who he was."

"And did Bert react to the test?" Merrion asked.

"No, he didn't. Perhaps he thought that Kingsbury was a friend of mine and for that very reason couldn't be the man he saw on the day of Wiegler's death. And I've never spoken to him on the subject, for reasons which I think you will understand."

"Yes, I understand," Merrion replied. "And, believe me, I fully sympathise with your position. But, as an outsider, I'm bound to look at things differently. I've never had the slightest doubt that Wiegler was murdered. The police, on the other hand, convinced themselves that his death was accidental. It's just possible that they may be mistaken again, but this time the other way round. But, assuming them to be right, and that Dr. Mountwell was in fact murdered, is there any evidence of connection between the two crimes?"

"They were both acting as St. John Cecil's locums," said Corringham. "And that's why I dread the investigations that are bound to be made. I forget whether or not you met Mrs. Cecil when you were staying here in November."

"I met her for a few minutes, one morning when she had come to see Lady Corringham. But I hardly had the oppor-

of forming any very definite opinion about her. I gathered at the time from what you told me that she thoroughly disliked Dr Wiegler. But I also gathered that she was not alone in that dislike, since Wiegler was generally unpopular with everybody in the place."

"That's true enough. But the disturbing fact is that she disliked Alida at least as much as she did Wiegler, although nearly every one else in the village thought her perfectly charming."

"I see," said Merrion. "Have you any idea why Mrs. Cecil disliked Dr. Mountwell so intensely?"

Corringham shrugged his shoulders. "How often is there what you and I should call a logical reason for one woman taking a dislike to another? Hermione was prejudiced against Alida from the very moment of her arrival. For one thing, the business had been arranged by her husband, and Hermione had no idea that the Dr Mountwell he had told her to expect was a woman. That was a bit of a shock to her in the first place. And then, you know what women are. Those two couldn't pull together somehow. I dare say because Alida wasn't what Hermione expected a woman doctor to be. I don't mean that any one could have criticised her professionally. She was extremely clever and competent, with a manner which tamed even the villagers. But she was at the same time a very well-educated and charming person, with far too much intelligence to conform to Hermione's inhibitions. That's all very vague, I know, but it's the sort of thing that can't be expressed in exact terms."

Merrion smiled. "Martial discovered that, quite a long time ago," he said. "'*Non amo te, Sabidi*' or, as Thomas Brown translated it, 'I do not like thee, Dr Fell.' We may take it that Mrs Cecil's dislike of Dr. Mountwell, though incapable of logical explanation, was none the less very real. But do you think that dislike was sufficiently intense to inspire her to murder?"

"I don't know!" Corringham exclaimed violently. "That's just why I asked you to come here. Ever since you told me why you believed Wiegler to have been murdered, my conscience hasn't given me a moment's peace. Well, I'm not going to do that a second time. I refuse to be guided entirely by the police, but if you assure me that Alida was murdered, I shan't rest until her murderer is found whoever he or she may be."

Merrion was secretly amused at this attitude, which, after all, was very natural. Corringham had not liked Wiegler, and

whatever opinion he might have had as to the manner of his death, he comforted himself with the reflection that he was as well dead as alive. But the case of Dr. Mountwell was an entirely different matter. His liking for her had overcome even his desire to shield his old friends, the members of the Cecil family. "I'm not a detective, you know," said Merrion gently.

"Not professionally, perhaps," Corringham replied. "But you are a man trained to very acute observation. Your description of what you saw when we went to look for Wiegler's body proves that. And I shall be quite content to accept your opinion as to the cause of Alida's death, whether it agrees with the theory of the police or not."

"I'll certainly do my best to help you," said Merrion. "You'll have to take me round and show me where and how it happened, of course. But I'd like to ask you a few preliminary questions. Assuming, as I think we safely may, that Wiegler was murdered, who in your opinion could have murdered him, and for what reason? You've thought about that, I dare say."

"Thought about it?" Corringham exclaimed. "I should just think I had. So far as I can make out, there are three possibilities. The village suspected Wiegler of being a spy of some kind, and I hear that since his death quite a lot of people have become convinced of the fact. This may have provided a pretext for his murder. Roland Cecil, inspired by his mother's complaints against the man, may have found it convenient to share, or pretend to share, the common belief."

Merrion made no comment upon this, and Corringham proceeded. "Then there's the undeniable fact that Wiegler had made himself universally unpopular. He had a positive gift for interference in affairs beyond his province. He was always threatening to expose people or to inflict some unpleasantness upon them. Simon Plowman, the builder, is a case in point. I don't think we can rule out the possibility that one of these people followed Wiegler to Gallows Wood, and murdered him there."

"Finally there is Bert Hawthorne's red-haired stranger, who may or may not have been Kingsbury. That line of inquiry has never been followed up. It seems to me that if the man did actually go into Gallows Wood, the probability is that he at least saw Wiegler. But nobody can tell us whether he went as far as the wood. Bert only saw him enter the lane leading to it and come out again. The postcards, or whatever

"I were, don't seem to me to be of much help. He may have had them in his pocket when he went up the lane."

Merrion nodded approvingly. "I don't think we can add anything to that," he said. "Now comes my next question. Assuming for the moment that Dr. Mountwell was murdered, do any of the motives for Wiegler's murder apply in her case?"

"There's no question of any one suspecting her of being a spy," Corringham replied. "That pretext could not possibly be alleged in her case. As I tell you, everybody in the place liked her, or, even if they were prejudiced against a woman doctor, as a few of them were, they had no grievance against her. The red-haired stranger, whoever he may have been, hardly seems to come into the picture."

"There is apparently only one common factor," Merrion remarked. "Mrs Cecil's dislike of both Wiegler and Dr. Mountwell. But is it absolutely necessary to look for a common factor? The two may have been murdered by different people, actuated by entirely different motives. And these motives may not have originated in Exton Forcett."

"I'd very much like to think that was the case," Corringham replied. "But it appears to me extremely unlikely. Such a thing would involve too extraordinary a coincidence."

"I quite agree," said Merrion. "But it's a very good rule when starting on an investigation like this to keep an absolutely open mind, and not to be influenced one way or the other by apparent coincidences. And I don't think we need discuss the matter any further until we are in possession of the relevant facts."

Immediately after lunch Corringham and Merrion set out for Folly Farm Lane. When they reached the pillar-box at the corner, they found Briston and Foxcroft standing there. Both saluted at their approach, but still remained blocking the lane. It was evident that the fatal spot was, for the moment at least, forbidden ground.

"Good-afternoon, Sir Mark," said Briston. "I'd rather you didn't go down the lane just now, if you don't mind. We're expecting the Super every moment. He rang up a few minutes ago to say he was coming along with an officer from Scotland Yard."

"Of course we won't go anywhere you don't want us to," Corringham replied. "You remember Captain Merrion, don't you? He was staying with me last Christmas."

"Yes, sir, I remember well enough," Briston replied. "Whether or not he saw anything remarkable in Merrion's

reappearance at this particular juncture was not apparent. Before there was opportunity for further conversation the superintendent's car came in sight. It drew up, and two men alighted from it. A superintendent of the county constabulary and another, presumably the officer from Scotland Yard. As the latter appeared, Merrion chuckled. "That's a stroke of luck," he said. "Inspector Arnold is a very old friend of mine indeed."

After a word with the two policemen, the superintendent turned to Corringham, whom he knew well. "Good-afternoon, Sir Mark," he said as they shook hands. "Let me introduce Inspector Arnold, who has come down from the Yard to help us with this business."

Arnold scarcely waited for this introduction before turning to Merrion. "Well, I'm blest!" he exclaimed. "It's very good to meet you unexpectedly like this. But what the dickens are you doing here?"

"Staying for a day or two with Sir Mark," Merrion replied promptly. "It's not the first time I've done that. Where do you propose to stay while you're in these parts?"

"I don't know," said Arnold. "I've brought a suitcase with me. I suppose there's a pub, isn't there?"

"There is," Merrion replied. "But I doubt whether they would put you up. They haven't got any accommodation for visitors. What do you think, Sir Mark?"

Corringham divined what was in Merrion's mind. "You're an old friend of Captain Merrion's, I hear, Inspector," he said. "I expect you'd like a chance of a yarn with him. I shall be only too glad to put you up at Exton House for as long as you care to stay."

After a glance at Merrion, whose almost imperceptible wink gave him the clue, Arnold accepted this offer gratefully. It was arranged that the superintendent should drop his suitcase at the house when he went home in the car. Then, with the remark that no doubt the police wanted to get on with the job, Merrion led Corringham away.

"Nothing could be better," he said, when they had gone a little way. "Arnold is a very good fellow, and we've been friends long enough to trust one another completely. It was good of you to offer to put him up. I think you'll find that will enable us to keep in touch with the police investigations. I'd better not butt in till I've heard what he's got to tell me."

As they walked back towards Exton House, Corringham pointed to the occupant of a wheel-chair propelling himself

slowly through the village. "That's Bert Hawthorne," he said. "The man I was telling you about before lunch. He's always out in that chair of his, if the weather's anything like."

"Wouldn't it be rather a good plan to ask him about Kingsbury?" Merrion replied. "Whether he associated him with his red-haired stranger, I mean. You'll have to do the talking. If I start asking him questions, he'll think there's something up."

"Yes, if you like," said Corringham. They overtook Bert by the garden gate of Quenbies and caught a glimpse of Mrs Burwash, wrapped up in a brightly-coloured shawl, pottering about in front of her house. She looked up at the sound of their footsteps, and waved her hand in reply to their salute. Her bright eyes rested on the group but she said nothing.

Corringham accosted the occupant of the wheel-chair. "Nice afternoon, though the air's a bit keen," he said. "Are you going anywhere in particular?"

"I was going to see Mr. Yates, sir," Bert replied. "I've got a book here that he lent me, and I was taking it back. He promised to lend me another, if I came along."

"Then we're all going the same way," said Corringham. "Push along, and we'll come with you. How's your sister? She's gone down with this infernal 'flu, I'm sorry to hear."

"Sarah's doing nicely, thank you, sir," Bert replied. "Dr. Cecil's looked in to see her this morning and that did her a power of good. She was terribly pleased to see him again."

"We're all glad to have Dr. Cecil back," said Corringham. And then, seeing they were out of earshot of Quenbies, "This is a friend of mine, Captain Merrion."

Bert touched his cap in recognition. "I think I've seen you in these parts before, sir," he said. "Weren't you down here when the Commander was home in the latter part of last year?"

"Quite right, I was," Merrion replied. "You've got a pretty good memory for faces."

"He has," Corringham remarked. "By the way, Bert, that reminds me. Do you remember one day not long before Christmas, when I stopped and had a word with you? Just about here, it was. You were on your way to borrow a book from Yates. There were two people with me, Mr. Gunthorpe from Marbeach and another man?"

"Yes, sir, I remember very well. You were good enough to say that Mr. Yates might lend me books belonging to yourself or her ladyship. And I'd like to thank you, sir."

"You're welcome to read any book we've got in the house. Did you notice the third man of the party?"

"I took him to be a friend of yours, sir," Bert replied, in a tone which implied that it would be disrespectful on his part to notice anything amiss in one who enjoyed that privilege.

"He wasn't a friend of mine," Corringham assured him. "Mr. Gunthorpe brought him over to see me on a matter of business. I had never met him before and I haven't set eyes on him since."

Bert made no reply to this and they continued for some way in silence. He was evidently thinking hard, for he frowned severely at the road ahead. "Well, I don't know, sir," he said doubtfully at last. "I expect Mr. Gunthorpe knows all about that other gentleman."

"He doesn't know very much more about him than I do," Corringham said. "He's an entire stranger to this neighbourhood. I don't suppose he's ever been here before."

"Well, maybe not, sir. Perhaps I shouldn't say such a thing, but I've seen somebody very like him not so very far from where we are now. Only this other man was dressed different, and his hair was a lot longer. I wouldn't like to say it was the same gentleman."

"It's not impossible to change one's clothes and have one's hair cut even in these days," said Corringham encouragingly. "When did you see this other man?"

"I don't want to say anything I shouldn't, sir. It might get me into trouble."

"There's no fear of that. If you think you saw this man before you're perfectly free to say so."

"If you say so, sir, that's good enough for me. I saw a chap on the afternoon that Dr. Wiegler was killed. He went up Mill Lane and a little afterwards he came back again. And when I first set eyes on the gentleman with you, sir, I thought he was very like, barring the clothes he was wearing and his hair being cut short. But there, it may just have been a likeness and no more. I wouldn't like to say that the two were the same."

It was clearly useless to pursue the matter any further. The three of them went on together to the House, where they parted, Bert to seek Yates in the back premises. Corringham and Merrion made their way to the warmth of the library fire. "Well, you heard what Bert had to say," the former remarked. "You must make allowances for his personal outlook. He was desperately afraid of giving offence by

Identifying Kingsbury with his red-haired stranger. Now there's another thing. He's probably offended himself, because, although he told Foxcroft at the time about his red-haired stranger, no notice was taken of his statement. That's why he kept quiet about Kingsbury. But I'm willing to bet he recognised him all right. Look at the way he recognised you at once."

"Yes," said Merrion a trifle doubtfully. "But even if Kingsbury and the red-haired stranger are one and the same, it doesn't exactly follow that he murdered Wiegler. The police are not likely to take much interest in that affair unless they have reason to suppose that by so doing they would learn something about the present case. We shall know the line they are taking after I've had a chance of a talk with Arnold."

They remained where they were, discussing various possibilities until Lady Corringham joined them, shortly after which tea was brought in. It was nearly five o'clock when Yates appeared at the door. "Inspector Arnold!" he announced sonorously.

Corryingham sprang to his feet as Arnold came in. "You're just in time for a cup of tea, Mr. Arnold," he said. "Let me introduce my wife. Now then, sit down here by the fire and make yourself comfortable. Your suitcase has been taken to your room and I'll show you up there when you've had tea."

Arnold, who at first showed symptoms of shyness at finding himself a guest in a country house, very soon thawed under the influence of Sir Mark and Lady Corringham. After a while his host took him upstairs, and in a few minutes they returned to the library. "Now you know your way about," said Corringham. "We want you to understand that while you're here you're to do just exactly as you please. Come in and go out when it suits you. If you chance to miss a meal there will be something ready for you when you come in. And now, if you'll excuse us, we'll leave you and Merrion to entertain each other. My wife and I have some very important domestic matters to attend to. You'll see that Mr. Arnold has everything he wants, won't you, Merrion?"

When the Corringhams had thus tactfully left them alone, Merrion lighted a cigarette and smiled ingratiatingly at Arnold.

"Well?" he asked. "And how have you been getting on?"

"Wait a minute," Arnold replied. "First of all, I've got a few questions to ask you. To begin with, what are you doing

here? You're an object of considerable suspicion to the local police, I may tell you. And you can't altogether blame them for that."

"I've a perfectly marvellous alibi for the time of Dr. Mountwell's death," said Merrion calmly.

"You would have. Knowing you as I do, I should take that as almost proof of your guilt. But seriously, your appearance on the scene does seem a bit odd. They tell me that another doctor met with a fatal accident some months ago, and that you were here at the time. And you're here again now this has happened. I've heard some very queer rumours about that other doctor. I'm bound to ask you, in the strictest confidence, of course, if you're here on duty?"

"Good heavens, no!" Merrion exclaimed. "You haven't told the local cops what my duties are, I hope?"

"You ought to know me better than that," Arnold replied. "But after I'd heard those queer rumours about that other doctor with the foreign name being a spy, I wondered, that's all."

Merrion shook his head. "I don't think there was any truth in those rumours, and in any case I was not concerned with them. I'll explain what I'm doing here in as few words as possible. Sir Mark's son, Commander Corringham, who is a very excellent fellow, is working at the Admiralty; and he and I have become very good friends. Last November he asked me to come and stay with him here for a few days. While I was here Dr. Wiegler met with that fatal accident you've been told about. I formed one of the party which set out to recover the body. While we were doing so, I noticed certain things which convinced me that Wiegler had been murdered."

"Hold on!" Arnold exclaimed. "I'm told the verdict was one of accidental death. How was that?"

"Mainly, I think, because every one concerned believed, or at all events wanted to believe, that his death was accidental. I'm thankful to say that I wasn't asked to give evidence. But I did tell Sir Mark what I had seen, quite privately, you understand. It must have made some impression on him, for when Dr. Mountwell was killed he rang me up and asked me to come. That was last night, and I drove over here from High Eldersham this morning."

"What did he want you to come for?" Arnold asked a trifle suspiciously.

"He wanted to know the truth, and he imagined that. I

possessed the magic powers necessary to discover it. And, if I may say so, he doesn't altogether trust the abilities of the local police."

"I don't altogether blame him for that. The local man seems to have his head screwed on fairly straight. But I'm inclined to think that sergeant from Marbeach is a bit of an ass. All the same, I don't quite understand why Sir Mark should be so interested."

"That can be expressed in a nutshell. Both Sir Mark and Lady Corringham had got very fond of Dr. Mountwell since she has been here. Then, the Cecils are very old friends of theirs and Sir Mark has got it into his head that a member of that family may have had something to do with this affair. I hold a sort of watching brief on his behalf, if you understand what I mean."

"Oh, so that's what Sir Mark thinks, is it?" said Arnold meaningly. "Very well, now I'll answer your question as to how I've got on. I've heard a lot and seen a little during the last two or three hours. But I want to see some more, and since I've found you here, you may as well help."

"I'd like nothing better," Merrion replied. "I may as well tell you that I've heard a lot, too, but I've seen absolutely nothing, not even the scene of the accident. What's the programme?"

"I'll tell you. From what we can make out, Dr. Mountwell must have been killed some time between half-past six and half-past eight yesterday evening. What do you know about this Dr. Cecil?"

"Nothing but what I've heard. I've formed the impression that he must be a casual sort of chap, popular enough with everybody, including his patients, but not very brilliant professionally."

"He's casual enough. You'd hardly believe it, but he never made any attempt to find out when death had occurred. He seems to have thought that as the girl was dead, there was no more to be done. And now, of course, he can't say within several hours when she died. However, he may have his own reasons for that."

"Now I understand that it was fine and frosty here yesterday evening, and that it was never really dark, for the moon rose very soon after sunset. I wonder if there's an almanac anywhere handy? I'd like to get the times right."

"I can probably help you," Merrion replied. "I find it convenient to keep the almanac more or less in my head."

Yesterday the sun set at 5 50 p m and the moon rose at 6.3 p m "

" Then if the sky was clear, as it is this evening, there can't have been any interval of darkness What are the times for to-day ? "

" Sunset is at 5 53, and the moon rises at 6.45," Merrion replied -

Arnold made a rapid note of these times " So that at a quarter-past seven this morning the light would be much the same as it was at half-past six yesterday ? " he suggested

" The light of the moon would," Merrion agreed " But, of course, there would be a bit less twilight On the whole, though, I think you might say that, other things being equal, the conditions of visibility would be approximately the same. Is that what you're getting at ? "

" That's it Now this is what I'm going to do I'm going to find out how much can be seen in Holly Farm Lane as they call it, at a quarter-past seven And you're coming with me. It's half-past six now and we may as well make a start."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE WEATHER was as clear and frosty when they set out, as it had been on the previous evening There was still an after-glow in the western sky, and though the moon had not yet risen, objects could easily be distinguished at a distance of a few yards

Arnold chuckled as they made their way through the village. " We'll have the field to ourselves, at all events," he said " I wanted the chance of trying out something on my own, so I asked the sergeant and the local man to make inquiries round about for any suspicious strangers I don't for a moment suppose they'll hear of any, but it will keep them out of the way till we've finished our job Here we are at the corner of the lane The body was found a little way down it "

They reached the chalk marks on the wall, and Arnold pointed them out to his companion. " The ground on the other side of that wall is a bit higher than it is this side," he said. " The idea is that Dr Mountwell, walking along the footpath here, was hit on the top of the head from the other side of the wall Now that the moon's beginning to rise, you see how light it is in this lane. There are no shadows for several yards either

way in which any one could hide. Foxcroft is positive that there were no signs of a struggle. Dr Mountwell must have been struck down before she had a chance of defending herself. And it seems to me that the blow can only have come from inside the wall. Do you see any objection to that?"

Merrion looked about him in the growing moonlight. "Not so far," he replied. "What's on the other side of that wall?"

"You'll see for yourself in a moment, for you're going over it," Arnold said. "I want to make sure that it could have been done. I'll walk along the footpath and you shall see if it's possible to swipe me on the head as I go by. I asked Foxcroft to borrow a ladder from his brother-in-law who found the body. He was to leave it in the ditch beside the lane. Ah, here it is!"

Arnold picked out of the ditch a short ladder, and also a piece of stick about three feet long. He put the ladder against the wall, and after satisfying himself that it was secure, Merrion scaled it. "What can you see?" Arnold asked.

"An overgrown path, about four feet below the top of the wall," Merrion replied. "An iron railing divides the path from the meadow. At the farther side of the meadow are some trees. I can't see anything beyond them."

"Good enough," said Arnold. "Now then, take this stick and hop over. Hide behind the wall, and when you hear me come along, see if you can hit me on the head. Gently, mind."

Merrion got over the wall, crouched down behind it, and waited. He heard Arnold's footsteps growing fainter in the distance as he went along the lane towards Folly Farm. After a pause he heard the footsteps returning. When he judged Arnold was within a few yards he raised himself and peeped over the wall. Arnold's head was a foot or so below him and, leaning over, he tapped it lightly with the stick. "How's that?" he asked. "I could have brained you with the greatest ease. Let's change places and you can try for yourself."

They repeated the experiment, this time with Merrion as the victim and Arnold the aggressor. Then, after some further investigation of the lane, they replaced the ladder and stick for Foxcroft to retrieve at his leisure. This done, they started back to Exton House.

On the way Arnold repeated to Merrion the facts of the tragedy as he had heard them from the local police. "Foxcroft started the idea that the blow had been struck from inside the wall," he went on. "This morning, before I

got here, he and Briston did a bit of exploring. The wall runs right round Foursquare, Dr. Cecil's place, and the path you saw follows it all the way. They walked along the path looking for footprints, but didn't find any, for the ground was far too hard. But they found something else. In the paddock, exactly twelve yards from the spot where the body was found they picked up an ash walking-stick, with a heavy knob on one end. I've seen it, and it's just the sort of weapon that might have been used. That stick I gave you just now is exactly the same length though not nearly so heavy."

"Was there anything about the walking-stick to show it had been used as a weapon?"

"Not so far as one could tell by just looking at it. The superintendent took it away this afternoon at my suggestion, to have it properly examined. You wouldn't expect to find blood or hair on the knob, for Dr. Mountwell was wearing a felt hat and the blow must have been delivered through that. But there may possibly be a fingerprint on the other end."

"Possibly," Merrion agreed. "One is naturally inclined to ask who the stick belongs to."

"One is. Plain ash walking-sticks with knobs and no mountings except a ferrule, are pretty common, and one is very much like another. Foxcroft says that he has very often seen Dr. Cecil going about with an exactly similar stick in his hand. For the moment, that's how the matter stands. We know that Dr. Cecil came home some time before the murder."

"As did his son Roland. Now look here. We're both on this job and we may as well work together. Our chief disadvantage is that we are both strangers. My advice is that we take Sir Mark into our confidence. He's lived here all his life, and knows every one in the place."

"But you said that the Cecils were among his oldest friends," Arnold objected.

"That's quite true. But I have his word for it that he won't allow any consideration of friendship to stand in the way this time. I know very well that he'd do anything in his power to run Dr. Mountwell's murderer to earth."

"If there's anything in what you've told me, he didn't seem any too keen to put himself out the last time," said Arnold, still unconvinced.

"This is an entirely different matter, for many reasons. Although I haven't told Sir Mark, I've heard quite a lot about Dr. Mountwell from his son, Leonard Corringham. She was a fair way of becoming a far greater friend of the family."

even the Cecils, or so at least I infer. 'You'd much better agree to what I suggest.'

So that evening as the three men sat in the library after dinner, Arnold told his host of the progress of the investigation up to date. "I don't think there's the slightest doubt that Dr. Mountwell was deliberately murdered," he summed up. "And I think it's almost equally certain that the murderer was hidden behind the wall. I'd rather leave the walking-stick out of the picture for the present, until we know more about it. The first question seems to be, who was in, or could have got into, the grounds of Foursquare at the time?"

"I very much appreciate your frankness in putting the details before me, Mr. Arnold," Corringham replied. "Believe me, if I can help you in any way, I am only too anxious to do so. This is a very terrible affair, and whatever it may cost me, I mean to see it through. But before I answer your question I should like to know the time when the blow was struck."

"Unfortunately we can't establish the exact time, Sir Mark," said Arnold. "It seems that the sergeant and Foxcroft have made inquiries at Folly Farm. Dr. Mountwell called there yesterday evening, to see the daughter of the house. She was asked to do so by the girl's father. But nobody seems to know what time she came, or what is far more important, what time she left. They just don't seem to have noticed. All they can say is that they think it was some time between six and seven."

"What time is the pillar-box at the corner of the lane cleared?" Merrion asked.

"Half-past nine in the morning and quarter-past seven in the evening," Corringham replied.

"I understand that an unposted letter was found beside the body," said Merrion. "The assumption is that Dr. Mountwell intended to post it in the pillar-box and that she took the longer way back to Foursquare in order to do so. If the box had already been cleared she would have been more likely to take the short-cut. But that's only a suggestion."

"A pretty good one, in my opinion," Arnold remarked. "And while we're on the subject, there's a point I'm not quite sure about. Could the body have lain there for any considerable time without being seen by some passer-by or other?"

"Quite easily, I think," Corringham replied. "The lane isn't a thoroughfare. It leads to Folly Farm and the two cottages standing beside it and to nowhere else. Olliver, the farmer, employs four men. Two of these live one in each of the

cottages close to the farm. Of the others, one lives in the centre of the village, the other on what they call the Green. The first of these probably goes to and from his work by the lane, the second more probably across the fields. In any case the men knock off at six at this time of year, and would be home by half-past at the earliest. It would only be by chance that any one would use the lane between about a quarter to six in the evening and say a quarter to seven next morning."

"I see," said Arnold. "Then suppose we put down a quarter to seven as the time when the blow was struck. I don't think that can be very far out."

"Then I'll answer your question to the best of my ability," Corringham said. "At that time yesterday evening the Cecil household were probably all at Foursquare. Dr. and Mrs. Cecil, Roland, Miss Draper, the secretary-dispenser, and Mabel, the maid. The surgery hour is from half-past six to half-past seven, and during that hour there are usually several patients on the premises, fetching medicine or waiting their turn to see the doctor. It would be possible to get a list of those who called yesterday evening from Miss Draper."

"Would it be difficult for any one else to get into the Foursquare grounds unobserved?"

Corringham considered this question. "It wouldn't be any too easy, as you'll see for yourself when you've had time to look round the place. A wall runs right round it, with only two gateways, the drive entrance and the yard entrance. On the outside of the wall, I don't suppose the top of it is anywhere less than six feet from the ground, and in most places it is considerably more. The drive entrance is overlooked by a pair of semi-detached houses exactly opposite. During surgery hours there is always a certain amount of coming and going through the yard entrance, which is the one used by patients."

"Thank you, Sir Mark," said Arnold. "On the whole, it seems likely that the murderer had some ostensible reason for being on the grounds and entered them openly."

"Then your question is answered," Merrion observed. "Now let's look at things from another point of view. Accepting your theory that the murderer struck her down from inside the wall, was he there by chance, or had he reason to expect that Dr. Mountwell would come along?"

"I should think it almost certain that he was expecting her, and that he had taken up his position accordingly," Arnold replied. "He might have been there for some time,

for the spot where he was hiding couldn't be seen from the house "

Merrion nodded. " Exactly. And if he was expecting Dr. Mountwell, the second question is this Who knew, or could have found out, that she would be in Folly Farm Lane about that time ? We need hardly consider the possibility of her having been followed from the farm No follower would have had time to get into the Foursquare grounds and take up his position behind the wall Is it known when and where Dr Mountwell received the message asking her to visit Folly Farm ? "

" Yes, the sergeant and Foxcroft found that out between them," Arnold replied. " Olliver, the farmer, stated that he called at Foursquare at half-past two, saw Dr. Mountwell personally and asked her to come and see his daughter She promised to do this, but said she would be late, as she had several other calls to make first. Miss Draper was present at the time "

" So that, from half-past two onwards, there were three people who knew of her intended visit, and might have spoken of it," said Merrion " I wonder if it would be possible to trace the course of Dr Mountwell's round yesterday afternoon ? "

" I may be able to help there," Corringham replied " Yesterday afternoon I took Hermione Cecil into Marbeach to meet her husband I got back here about a quarter to five, and found Dr Mountwell in the drawing-room having tea with my wife and Mr and Mrs Laverock She had called in to see our cook who is down with 'flu, but is, I am thankful to say, very much better to-day. My wife had insisted on her stopping for a cup of tea before she left She was looking very tired, as well she might after all she had had to do in the last fortnight or so "

" Did she say anything about where she was going next ? " Merrion asked

" Yes, just before she left here, which was about five o'clock," Corringham replied " My wife asked her if she couldn't take a rest, but she said she couldn't just then However, she had only two more calls to make, on Mrs. Burwash and at Folly Farm After that she hoped she would not be called out again that evening I said that she ought to make St John Cecil help her while he was at home But she said she couldn't very well do that."

It occurred to Merrion that the number of people who knew of the intended visit to Folly Farm was rapidly increasing

However, he thought it better not to say so just then. "Now we come to the third question, which to my mind is the most puzzling of all. What was the motive? Have your investigations thrown any light upon that, Arnold?"

"Very little," Arnold replied. "I am assured by Foxcroft that there were absolutely no signs of a struggle, which eliminates one possible motive. Nor was the motive robbery, for so far as we can tell nothing was taken. An attaché-case was picked up and I've looked into that myself. There was a lot of medical stuff, and a small leather handbag, in which were some notes and silver. And, in addition, Dr Mountwell was wearing a diamond wrist-watch which I imagine must be pretty valuable. A thief would certainly have spotted that, even if he hadn't thought of opening the attaché-case."

"A diamond wrist-watch!" Corringham exclaimed. "Are you quite sure of that, Mr Arnold?"

"I can't say that I actually saw it on her wrist, for the sergeant had taken it off before I came," Arnold replied. "But he showed it to me and told me where he had found it. There is no doubt that Dr. Mountwell was wearing it when she was killed."

"That's a most extraordinary thing," said Corringham. "When she was here, she was wearing the small silver watch that she always carried on her wrist. I'm ready to swear to that, for she compared it with the drawing-room clock, just before she left."

"That's rather an interesting point," said Merrion. "What became of the small silver watch?"

"Dr Mountwell wasn't wearing it when her body was found," Arnold replied. "The sergeant had given me a complete list of her clothing, and so forth, including the diamond wrist-watch. There's no mention of a silver watch on that. And it certainly isn't in the attaché-case or handbag."

"It's a point that ought to be looked into," said Merrion. "But it's not likely to throw any light on the matter. Even if we suppose that Dr Mountwell was wearing two watches no thief would have taken the silver one and left the diamond one. Our third question is still unanswered. What do you say, Corringham?"

"I wish I knew what to say," Corringham replied heavily. "Mr Arnold has been perfectly open with me, and I owe it to him to be equally frank with him. But it seems to me, that your third question involves going back some little

"You've heard something about the death of Dr. Wiegler last November, I expect, Mr. Arnold?"

"Quite a lot, one way and another," Arnold replied. "First of all from the local police, who of course stoutly maintain that his death was accidental. Or rather the sergeant does. I'm not so sure that Foxcroft, who in my opinion is the brighter one of the two, is quite so positive. But they both admit that some ugly rumours were current at the time. Then I've heard Merrion's account of the affair. He has no doubt that Dr. Wiegler was murdered."

"I have not the slightest doubt that Dr. Wiegler was murdered, or at least rendered insensible by a blow on the back of the head from some heavy weapon," said Merrion gravely. "It would appear that Dr. Mountwell was killed by a blow from some similar weapon."

Corringham shuddered. "After the inquest, Merrion told me what he believed had happened," he said. "This confirmed my own suspicions. But I'm bound to admit I funked the issue. I dreaded any reopening of the inquiry, so I sheltered myself behind the verdict of the coroner's jury."

"Unless you could produce some definite proof in support of your suspicions, you were perfectly justified in doing so, Sir Mark," Arnold assured him. "Do I understand that these suspicions extended to the identity of the criminal?"

"I'm sorry to say that they did," Corringham replied. "Roland Cecil had the opportunity, as Merrion will agree. And he may have had some sort of a reason for killing Wiegler."

"Do you feel inclined to explain that reason, Sir Mark?" Arnold asked.

"I'll try, though to you it will probably seem utterly inadequate. You must understand that Wiegler was a man with a positive gift for making himself disliked. I may even say hated. He was a most excellent doctor, and was no doubt very successful. But as a general practitioner in a small village he was impossible. Not only did he interfere in matters which were no concern of his whatever, but he went out of his way to antagonise all those with whom he came in contact."

"We can all imagine what it would be like to have such a person billeted upon us. To Hermione Cecil, who has narrow views and a limited outlook, it was sheer torture. This was the groundwork of her hatred of the man. But, further than this, his behaviour was intolerable. He was always sneering at her husband's medical inefficiency. I dare say quite

justifiably, but it was hardly pleasant for Hermione. And there were a dozen other things as well. To give you an example. He had fallen foul of a man called Plowman, our local builder, and threatened to expose his malpractices in a certain matter. And he made it quite plain that this exposure would involve St. John Cecil, one of whose transactions with the said Plowman Wiegler declared to be unprofessional.

"Talking about these things in cold blood makes them seem utterly trivial and petty. But I can assure you that they exasperated Hermione Cecil beyond endurance. I have no doubt that she opened her heart to her son Roland when he came home on leave. And I have wondered since whether Roland may not have had more personal grounds for a hatred of Wiegler. I expect you have heard about those rather ridiculous rumours that Wiegler was engaged in espionage. Roland, who is young and inclined to be impatient, may have believed, or affected to believe them."

There was a short silence after Corringham had come to an end. Then Merrion spoke. "To any one young and hot-headed, Roland's grievances against Wiegler might present themselves as a motive for murder. But surely no such grievance can have existed in the case of Dr. Mountwell."

"Certainly not, except in Hermione's imagination," Corringham replied. "Dr. Mountwell was here rather less than three months, and in that time she made herself universally liked. A few old-fashioned people did not approve of women doctors, but their disapproval was on professional and certainly not personal grounds. No one could criticise her ability. She was probably just as competent as Wiegler, although naturally she lacked his long experience."

"While we're on the subject of professional ability, Sir Mark, I'd like to ask one question," said Arnold. "What is your opinion of Dr. Cecil, not as a man, but as a doctor?"

"It's not very high, I'm afraid," Corringham replied. "I've known him literally all his life, and I've always been very fond of him. But I've never had any great confidence in him as a doctor. I don't think his knowledge is any too thorough, and he's apt to be infernally casual in his treatment."

"One might say that the village has benefited by having two competent locums in his absence," Merrion suggested.

"But do the members of the community realise that?"

Corringham smiled. "I doubt it. St. John always got on very well with his patients, though he may not have handled their ailments very skilfully. Perhaps because he was born

here and they felt he was one of themselves. Apart from likes and dislikes, there is always a prejudice against strangers, you know."

"I do know," Merrion replied. "But prejudice of that kind scarcely provides a motive for murder. Can you think of any one outside the Foursquare circle who could have had any reason, real or fancied, for killing Dr. Mountwell?"

"I've put that question to myself often enough, during the last twenty-four hours. And I can think of no one. Alida was an entirely different type of person from Wiegler. Her aim was to do the best she could for her patients, from the strictly medical point of view. She would never have dreamt of interfering in their private concerns. Sooner or later I hear pretty well everything that's said in this village. And I have never heard that any one has uttered a word of complaint against Dr. Mountwell, personally or professionally."

"That's very much what Foxcroft told me," said Arnold. "I suppose there isn't a homicidal maniac in the place? One has to consider all the possibilities."

"I think it's extremely unlikely," Corringham replied. "If there had been, Wiegler would have found him out, you may be sure of that. And why on earth should a homicidal maniac devote his attentions solely to St. John's locums?"

"That's the extraordinary part of it all," said Merrion. "It comes to this, we seem to have come to the point where we can imagine no motive existing outside what I have called the Foursquare Circle. Does the fact that Dr. Mountwell was murdered on the day of the return home of both Dr. Cecil and his son Roland suggest that some motive exists within that circle?"

"I don't know," Corringham replied gloomily. "But I'm very much afraid that it does, and that Alida's death was inspired by Hermione. You see, neither St. John nor Roland had ever seen her."

This was obviously news to Arnold. "Is that so, Sir Mark?" he asked a trifle incredulously.

"I have Alida's word for it that she and St. John had never met. The arrangements for her to come here as locum were made through an uncle of hers, who was serving in the same Middle East hospital as St. John. And Roland has not been home on leave since Alida has been here. And, by Jove! that reminds me of a remark my wife made, weeks ago."

"Would it be indiscreet to ask you to repeat that remark?" Merrion asked.

"Not in the least, though I take it that prophetic utterances are not evidence in any court. We were discussing Hermione's attitude towards Alida, soon after she first came, and my wife said that she couldn't help wondering what would happen the first time that Roland came home on leave."

Merrion nodded understandingly. "I think I can follow Lady Corringham's train of thought. She certainly did not anticipate that Dr. Mountwell would be murdered. But she envisaged the possibility that Roland's susceptible young heart might fall a victim to Dr. Mountwell's charms, and that his mother would most strongly disapprove."

But Arnold was still concerned with his own puzzle. "I suppose it's quite certain that neither Dr. Cecil nor his son met Dr. Mountwell before her death? What time did they arrive here yesterday?"

"St. John arrived at Foursquare about twenty to five," Corringham replied. "I know that, for I drove him there myself from Marbeach Station. I don't think either St. John or Hermione knew that Roland was coming, for they said nothing about it. I have no idea when he did actually come, or how he got here. Do either of you want to ask me any more questions?"

"I don't think so just now," Merrion replied, after exchanging glances with Arnold. "We're very grateful for the information you've given us."

"Then, being tactful, I'm going to bed," said Corringham. "I'm sure you want to talk things over between you. And let me repeat once more that I expect you to treat this house as your own."

When, a minute or two later, their host had left the room, Merrion lighted a cigarette. "I told you it would pay to take Corringham into our confidence," he said. "Apart from some useful facts he's shown us quite a lot of local colour. What do you make of it all?"

"Everything seems to point to Dr. Mountwell having been murdered by one of the Cecil's," Arnold replied. "The blow was struck from inside the wall, we're both quite satisfied about that. I don't think there's very much doubt that the ash walking-stick was the weapon used, and that it belonged to Dr. Cecil. But it's the motive that puzzles me. There must be something much deeper than Mrs. Cecil's antipathy."

"That's just what I think," Merrion agreed. "It seems such a queer moment for the murder to have been committed. Dr. Cecil had just come home, and we know that Mrs. Cecil had

plenty of opportunity for talking to him. Assuming that she had a much more powerful grievance against Dr. Mountwell than any one suspected. She had only to insist that her husband should get rid of the woman and find another locum. Murder seems most uncalled for."

"Well, set your imagination to work," said Arnold. "It doesn't often fail you."

"I've been wondering," Merrion replied. "I think we shall have to assume that Dr Cecil and Dr Mountwell never did meet. From the time she left here until she was killed she was visiting patients and it doesn't seem likely that Dr Cecil intercepted her. Is it possible that someone had a vital and urgent reason for preventing a meeting taking place?"

"That's an idea certainly," said Arnold thoughtfully.

"The someone being Mrs Cecil."

"I don't see who else it could have been. Let's try to carry the idea a step farther. Dr Mountwell had found out something that it wasn't good for her to know. She had obtained definite evidence that Roland murdered Wiegler, if you like. She had warned Mrs Cecil that she meant to lay the facts before her husband as soon as he came home. How will that do?"

"Not so badly. It's all pure guesswork, of course. Do you suppose Roland did kill Wiegler?"

"He certainly had the opportunity. Corringham sent him up alone towards Gallows Wood to beat the birds towards us. That's Corringham's theory, though of course he'd be delighted to find that he was wrong. He's known the Cecils too long to want to see any of them hanged. His latest suggestion is that Kingsbury, who is Wiegler's heir, murdered him."

"Is there any vestige of fact to support that suggestion?"

"None, unless Kingsbury can be identified with Bert Hawthorne's red-haired stranger. This afternoon, just after meeting you, we saw Bert, and Corringham practically begged him to recognise Kingsbury as the man he had seen on the afternoon of Wiegler's death, and Bert was obviously frightfully keen not to disoblige him. But the most he could be induced to say was that Kingsbury was very like the man."

Arnold shook his head. "That sort of identification is no good. And in my opinion it would be a waste of time trying to investigate Wiegler's case. The clues are as cold as ice by this time. Go ahead with that idea of yours. Who actually murdered Dr Mountwell?"

"Apparently nobody expected Roland to turn up yesterday."

And yet it seems to me that his arrival was extraordinarily opportune. Had his mother sent him a message? And, when he came, did she tell him how things stood?"

"It's the best idea I've heard so far," said Arnold. "Anyway, it gives us something to start on. How do you suggest that we set about it? Roland, I'm told, went back to his unit this morning. He only had twenty-four hours' leave, and of course the local people had no grounds on which to detain him. They've got his address, though."

"Roland is just as well out of the way, for the present. The first and most obvious clue is the walking-stick, and it'll be your job to follow that up. But there are several other questions that want answering. When did Roland reach Foursquare? What opportunity had he for a private talk with his mother? What was each member of the Cecil family doing from the time of Dr. and Mrs. Cecil's arrival at Foursquare until the discovery of the body?"

"Then there are inquiries to be made into Dr. Mountwell's movements. We can easily confirm Corringham's statement of the time she left here, for there were three other people present. What other visits did she make after that? In each case we should like to know the times of her arrival and departure. What was her exact route and who did she meet, or who saw her, on her way? What is the explanation of the fact that when she was here she was wearing a silver watch and when she was killed, a diamond one? Finally, did any one know in advance what visits she intended to make yesterday afternoon and the order in which she intended to make them?"

"That's enough to go on with," said Arnold. "You know the inquest is to be held here at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning. The Super told me that he was going to have a word with the coroner and arrange for only formal evidence to be taken."

"Yes, the sergeant told Corringham about the inquest this morning, and he passed the information on to me. And I made up my mind then that I'd take advantage of it."

CHAPTER TWELVE

NEXT MORNING Arnold went out early to keep an appointment he had made with the local police. Merrion did not hurry himself, for not until ten o'clock did he follow his friend's

example Then he walked rapidly through the village till he came to the drive entrance to Foursquare

Here things were just as Corringham had described them. A pair of semi-detached houses stood exactly opposite the gate, and Merrion was conscious of being observed from behind half-drawn curtains But he noticed that the field of observation from these houses extended only to the gate and a few yards of the drive beyond Elsewhere the Foursquare grounds were screened by the wall and a row of tall fir-trees running parallel to it

From the drive entrance he followed the road as far as the pillar-box No one short of an acrobat could have scaled the wall between those two points, except with the aid of a ladder And, ladder or no ladder, it was difficult to imagine that any one would attempt such a feat on a main road, with houses scattered at intervals on the other side He turned into Folly Farm Lane, and walked along this until he reached the end of the wall, passing the spot where Dr Mountwell's body had been found. The wall was as impracticable here as in the stretch fronting the main road On the other hand, there were sections of it invisible from any building

Having followed the lane in a fairly straight line for some two hundred yards or rather more, the wall turned sharply back at an acute angle Standing at this corner, Merrion could follow the course of the lane until it reached Folly Farm, nearly half a mile away He noticed that the ground rose slightly towards the farm, so that an observer there could see the corner at which he stood, and a portion of the wall beyond it, but the distance would be too great to distinguish detail with the naked eye

The next section of the wall was again fairly straight For the first hundred yards or so it was bounded by arable land, in which the blades of corn were just beginning to show Beyond this, four rather squalid-looking cottages clustered round the ragged and weed-grown patch known as the Green From the corner where he stood Merrion could trace the footpath running from Folly Farm to the Green He could tell that it would be very sticky going in wet weather, but it was hard enough now And it certainly provided a short-cut to the village, including either entrance to Foursquare

Still following the wall, Merrion set out towards the Green There was only a strip of rough grass between the wall and the cornfield, but the frost still held and the ground was too hard to show the impression of his feet. As he reached the Green,

he found that it was impossible to follow the wall closely any longer without trespassing on private property, for the back garden of one of the cottages ran right up to it. A rough lean-to in this garden actually backed upon the wall. He contemplated this, wondering whether it would afford a foothold for climbing the wall, and came to the conclusion that it might if one were sufficiently active. He wouldn't care to tackle it himself. Getting too stiff in the joints for that sort of thing. In any case the shed had a corrugated iron roof, and no one could climb on to this without attracting the attention of the occupants of the cottage, no more than twenty yards away.

As he made the necessary detour round the cottages, he saw Bert Hawthorne propelling himself along the roadway surrounding the Green. Bert recognised him at once and touched his hat respectfully. "Nice fresh morning, sir," he said.

"That's just what brought me out for a walk round," Merrion replied. "I haven't seen this group of cottages before. They're quite picturesque, standing round their open space. Who lives in that one?"

Bert chuckled as Merrion pointed to the cottage with the garden running back to the wall. "Why, I do, to be sure, sir," he said. "I live there with my sister Sarah, who's in bed with the flu. I've just been along to the doctor's to fetch her medicine. Tom Docking, that works for the doctor, lives in the one opposite. Frank Ribstone that works for Mr. Olliver at Folly Farm lives over yonder, and old Mrs. Cawthorpe on t'other side."

"I see," said Merrion, eager enough to take advantage of the information Bert was so ready to impart. "I'm sorry to hear that your sister's in bed. It must make things very difficult for you."

"Oh, I manage," Bert replied cheerfully. "The neighbours are very good, and they come in and lend a hand. And there's a lot I can do for myself. It's only my legs won't work."

"You must find the time hang heavy on your hands sometimes, for all that," Merrion remarked. "In the evenings, for instance. You can't get out then, I suppose?"

Bert shook his head. "Not in the old chair. 'Tisn't safe these days in the blackout. But I've always been fond of reading, ever since I left school, and I've taken it up properly this winter. Mr. Yates up at the House, he lends me any books I like. And when I'm tired of reading, there's always the wireless."

"Yes, there's always the wireless, as you say. Did you hear the six o'clock news the evening before last?"

"I always listen to the news at eight in the morning and six and nine at night. I don't remember there was anything special the evening before last. I know I switched off pretty quick afterwards for I wanted to finish a book Mr Yates lent me. I read pretty well all the evening to get it finished."

After a few more words, Merrion went on, and Bert propelled himself towards his cottage. As he did so, a dog rushed out from a kennel beside the back door, and barked a welcome. Merrion smiled. The dog settled the matter. It was just possible that with the black-out up, Sarah in bed and Bert reading by the fire they might not have heard any one climbing on to the shed. But the dog certainly would have barked, calling their attention to the intruder.

Beyond the Hawthornes' cottage, he found that the wall was bounded by the track leading from the Green to the main road, and was again unclimbable. He followed the track to its junction with the road, and then turned to the right. The wall continued, high and forbidding, until he came to the yard entrance. Here he stopped and looked at his watch, to find that the time was now ten minutes to eleven. Every one who had business at the inquest would be safely at Exton House. He opened the gate, walked across the yard and knocked at the door marked "Surgery."

Eileen Draper opened the door and looked at him inquiringly. "Good-morning," said Merrion pleasantly. "You are Miss Draper, I believe. I am Captain Merrion, a friend of Sir Mark's. Perhaps you've heard of me. I was staying at Exton House when Dr. Wiegler was killed. May I come in?"

Eileen had heard favourably of Merrion from Roland. "Of course you may come in if you like, Captain Merrion," she replied. "But I'm all alone. Dr. Cecil has gone to the inquest."

She led him into the dispensary, her own particular province, and asked him to sit down.

"You won't mind if I go on with my work, will you?" she continued. "We're terribly rushed with all this influenza about."

"Not a bit," Merrion replied. "We can talk while you dispense. You got on very well with Dr. Mountwell, didn't you?"

Eileen's eyes opened wide at this unexpected question. "I shall miss her terribly," she said. "She was awfully good to

me I simply can't believe that she's dead. It's too frightful."

"It is frightful," Merrion agreed gravely. "I know you'd like to do anything you could to help find out how it happened. So I was sure you wouldn't mind if I came and had a chat with you. When did you last see Dr Mountwell?"

"Just before she went out on her afternoon rounds, soon after half-past two. Mr Olliver from Folly Farm came in a few minutes earlier, to ask her to go and see his daughter Marjorie. She promised she would, and I put the name down last on the list."

This sounded like a stroke of luck. "You made out a list of the calls Dr Mountwell had to make?" Merrion asked.

"Oh, yes, I always do. I type it out in duplicate, one copy for Dr. Mountwell to take with her, and one for the records. It was Dr Wiegler who started the idea, and Dr Mountwell kept it up."

"It's a very good idea indeed. Dr Mountwell took one copy of the list with her when she went out on her rounds on Wednesday afternoon. What became of the other copy?"

"I put it on the surgery table, for her to make notes on when she came back. Then I should have filed it with the others."

"The duplicate list was lying on the surgery table on Wednesday afternoon? Where is it now?"

"I don't know. I expect Dr Cecil's got it, if he hasn't torn it up. He told me yesterday that I needn't waste my time over things like that. He said he could remember who he had to see without carrying bits of paper about with him. Any notes he had to make he could dictate to me when he had time. Before he went away he used to keep everything in his head."

It seemed to Merrion that this was probably characteristic of Cecil's methods. The disappearance of the duplicate list was not necessarily significant. "You were at work in here all Wednesday afternoon, I expect?" he asked. "Did you have any visitors?"

Eileen shook her head. "I wasn't here all the afternoon. Dr. Mountwell had asked me to take round some of the medicines to people who hadn't anybody to send. She said that it would do me good to get out for an hour or so. So when I'd finished making them up, I started out, soon after four. And I didn't get back until just after six."

"And who was in charge here while you were out?" Merrion asked.

"Nobody." You see, patients know that it is no use coming

here till half-past six And Dr Mountwell said that it wouldn't matter if the telephone was left unattended for once "

" But any one might have walked in and taken a swig at the castor oil," Merrion objected

" They couldn't have done that I locked the door when I went out and took the key with me There are only two keys," Dr Mountwell had one and I've got the other. Nobody could have got in here, or into the surgery, without going through the house."

" You got back soon after six Did you see anybody after that? Before the patients began to arrive at half-past, I mean? "

" Oh, only Mr Roland Cecil," she replied with studied indifference. " He looked in for a minute He told me that he'd managed to get twenty-four hours' leave "

" To see you, Miss Draper? " Merrion asked artlessly

Eileen blushed furiously at that " Of course not! " she exclaimed in indignant confusion. " He got leave to meet his father, who had been away abroad such a long time He only came in here to ask me where everybody was, because he couldn't find them "

" By everybody he meant Dr and Mrs Cecil, one supposes Why couldn't he find them? They got home about twenty to five, I believe Weren't they in the house? "

" Apparently not He said he'd been looking for them and couldn't find them. But they were all together in the drawing-room when I looked in there to see if Dr. Mountwell had come in, soon after seven. And Mr Laverock was there too "

" What time was it when Roland looked in here? " Merrion asked

" It must have been about twenty-past six I know it was only a few minutes before the patients began to arrive And he must have been in the house to look for Dr and Mrs Cecil, for he came through the baize door between it and this wing."

" I see. Now I expect you'll be able to tell me something else, Miss Draper Did you notice whether Dr. Mountwell was wearing a wrist-watch when she went out on Wednesday afternoon? "

" I didn't notice, but she can't have been. When I went into the surgery at half-past six to see if everything was ready for the patients, I found the silver watch she always wore lying on the table with the glass broken I put it away in a drawer, so that it shouldn't be lost "

" You found the watch at half-past six? " Merrion asked

incredulously. "Are you quite sure that it was Dr. Mountwell's?"

"Of course I am. She always wore it and I must have seen it a hundred times. She told me that her mother had given it to her, and showed me her initials engraved on the back. I'll go and see if it is still in the drawer where I put it. I don't suppose anybody's touched it."

Eileen went into the surgery and returned in a few seconds with a watch, which she handed to Merrion. It was a lady's silver watch, with the initials A. M. engraved on the back of the case. The glass was starred, as though it had been struck with a hammer, and a fragment had wedged itself under the minute hand, stopping the watch at nine minutes past five.

"Thank you, Miss Draper," said Merrion as he handed back the watch. "I suppose you don't remember all the names on the list you made out for Dr. Mountwell on Wednesday afternoon?"

"I don't remember them all, for there were well over a dozen. I know that she arranged to start with young Mrs. Leader, who lives right away on the Marbeach road, and work back through the village so that she would be close here in time for the surgery hour. Let me see now. After Mrs. Leader there was old Mr. Rakes, and Mrs. Plowman, and little Alf Whitney. Oh, and several more, but I can't remember now who they were. But I do remember that when I first made out the list the last two visits were Mrs. Matthews, the cook at Exton House, and Mrs. Burwash at Quenbies. I put in Folly Farm at the end when Mr. Olliver came here."

Merrion thanked Eileen for the information she had given him, and left the premises by the way he had entered them. He walked slowly through the village, thinking deeply. There were very few people about, for those who were not at work had mostly drifted towards Exton House, to hear the result of the inquest. But as he passed the garden gate of Quenbies, a harsh commanding voice caused him to stop suddenly.

"Come inside, Captain Merrion, I want a word with you."

He looked round, to see the forbidding form of Mrs. Burwash standing at the gate. He obeyed the beckoning gesture of her skinny hand, and she led him into her sitting-room, hung with its gruesome trophies. "That's better," she said. "Now we can talk without all the people in the village overhearing us. I know you, though perhaps you don't know me. My name is Sophia Burwash and I've got my wits about me, in spite of my sprue. Are you a murderer?"

"Not by profession, Mrs. Burwash," Merrion replied lightly. "What makes you ask?"

"You were here when that insufferable busybody Wiegler was killed, and you were here again when Alida Mountwell was murdered. And don't you try to pretend that she wasn't murdered, for I know very well that she was. And if you didn't kill them both, who did?"

Merrion saw that the only way to deal with Sophia Burwash was to meet her on her own ground. "I might point out that you too were here on both occasions, Mrs. Burwash," he replied. "And as a matter of fact I wasn't. I only got here yesterday morning. And I believe that you saw Dr. Mountwell a short time before she was killed. That's so, isn't it?"

"What's that got to do with you?" Mrs. Burwash demanded. "If you're not a murderer, perhaps you're a detective, and that's nearly as bad."

"Again, not professionally," Merrion replied. "Now look here, Mrs. Burwash. If, as you say, Dr. Mountwell was murdered, it's up to all of us to help in finding the murderer."

"Of course she was murdered. Even the police are convinced of that, this time. Bob Tipping, the constable's brother-in-law told me so himself. And, of course, Wiegler was murdered too."

"Your knowledge of the events seems fairly extensive," Merrion remarked. "Who killed Dr. Wiegler?"

Mrs. Burwash snorted. "It isn't knowledge, it's common sense. And as to who murdered Wiegler I don't know and I don't care. He thoroughly deserved it, that's all I can say. He was an interfering idiot, and he didn't understand my sprue. Put me through a treatment of his own, indeed! I'd like to have seen him try it."

"You didn't murder him yourself, I suppose?" Merrion suggested.

"I don't set up to be a public benefactor. I told him to keep away from here, and that when I wanted a doctor I'd find one with more sense. It was no affair of mine if he went and got himself murdered that very afternoon. But Alida Mountwell is quite a different matter. She was a sensible girl who knew how to mind her own business. And she did my sprue a lot of good. Well, I warned her, soon after she first came."

"You warned her!" Merrion exclaimed. "What against, may I ask?"

"I told her not to wander about near the edges of gravel-pits, and I thought she was sharp enough to take the hint. It

ought to be obvious, even to the masculine mind, that there's somebody in the place who makes a habit of murdering doctors. Dr. Cecil will be the next, if he's not careful. I haven't met him yet for he had gone abroad before I came to live here. But, if he's as stupid as that pasty-faced wife of his, he may escape, after all."

"You think Mrs. Cecil is stupid?" Merrion asked, anxious to encourage Mrs. Burwash in every way.

"She's rather more brainless than most women who live in a place like this, and that's saying a good deal. Her only two subjects of conversation are the marvellous qualities of her husband and son, and the shortcomings of her domestic staff. And she was sufficiently a fool to dislike Alida Mountwell, as any one could see. Alida told me, the last time I saw her, that she hoped Dr. Cecil was coming home for good, as she was fed up with the Foursquare atmosphere."

"When did Dr. Mountwell tell you that?" Merrion asked artlessly.

"Didn't you say that you understood that I saw her a short time before she was killed? Well, that's what she told me. She looked in to see me on Wednesday afternoon."

"That's what I thought. Now, Mrs. Burwash, you're anxious to get to the bottom of this affair as I am. Inspector Arnold, who is conducting the investigation, is a very good friend of mine, and I'm doing my best to help him. We're both agreed that it's very important to trace Dr. Mountwell's movements during the period immediately before her death. Will you tell me about her visit to you on Wednesday afternoon, with as much detail as you can?"

"I knew you had an axe of your own to grind. Why couldn't you have said so at once? I didn't murder the girl if that's what you're afraid of. Alida Mountwell called here a few minutes after five. I'd asked her to look in when she could, for my sprue had been giving me trouble. She was very much upset because in opening the gate she had knocked watch against the ironwork and broken the glass. And every one knows how difficult it is to get a watch mended these days. So I found one of mine that I never use much now, and lent it to her."

"A diamond-studded watch?" Merrion asked.

"Yes. It was the only one I could find that went properly. It didn't match the clothes she was wearing, but I couldn't get that. She didn't want me to lend it to her, for she said it was too valuable. But I told her that things were only what they are."

when one had a use for them, and I made her take it. I meant to have given it to her, but now I'd like it back."

"I'll see that you get it back, Mrs. Burwash. How long was Dr. Mountwell here?"

"Not more than ten minutes or a quarter of an hour. I wanted to make her a cup of tea, for she looked worn out, but she said she'd just had one at Exton House. It must have been before half-past five when she left here, saying she only had one more visit to make."

On leaving Quenbies, Merrion did not return directly to Exton House. He walked past the lodge, and along the Mar-beach road until he came to Mill Lane. He walked up this, past the ruins of the windmill, through Gallows Wood and so to the brink of the gravel-pit. Here he stood for some time rapt in contemplation, not of the view over the Brooks, but of his own thoughts. At last he turned and made his way to Exton House by the field and the park.

He found Corringham pacing the paths of the flower-garden, and as usual, ready enough to talk. From him he heard an account of the inquest. Sergeant Briston had been in touch with the London police, asking them to break the news to Mrs. Mountwell, giving the address of the letter he had picked up. They had done so, but found that Mrs. Mountwell was seriously ill in bed, and that no other relative was available. Corringham had therefore been asked to give evidence of identity. The only other witnesses heard had been Bob Tipping, who had found the body, Foxcroft, who testified to the time he had received Bob's report, and St. John Cecil, who gave rather sketchy medical evidence. The coroner had then adjourned the inquiry, pending the investigations of the police.

Arnold appeared just in time for lunch, and when the meal was over he and Merrion retired to the library. Corringham excused himself on the plea that he had matters to attend to, and they were left alone. "You've heard about the inquest," said Arnold. "After it was adjourned I had a long talk with the Super. They seem to be pretty live folk in this country, for he had already got a preliminary report on that walking-stick. And a jolly interesting report it is, too."

"Does it suggest that the stick was the weapon used?" Merrion asked.

"It most certainly does. I told you that it was a straight ash stick, unpolished, with a ferrule at one end and a heavy knob at the other. The surface of this knob has developed slight cracks, the result of the wood drying with age. In these

cracks the chaps who examined the stick found one or two fibres, which corresponded exactly to the fibres of the felt hat Dr Mountwell was wearing. I may say that at the Super's own suggestion the stick, hat and fibres are being sent to the Yard for confirmation. But it doesn't seem likely that there's any doubt about it.

"That's not all. On the ferrule end of the stick they found some particles of garden soil, which is what one might expect. And all over the stick, at both ends and in the middle, are vestiges of fingermarks. The surface isn't a particularly favourable one, and the stick had been out all night before it was found. It probably won't be possible to identify the prints with certainty, but the experts say that there is no doubt the stick has been handled recently by at least three persons."

"Is it definitely established that the stick belonged to Dr. Cecil?" Merrion asked.

"We decided to go rather carefully about that," Arnold replied. "We don't want to ask for a statement from any of the Cecil party until we're a bit more sure of our ground. But Foxcroft was put on to the maid at Foursquare, a woman they call Mabel, who is some sort of relation of his wife's. Every one in this place seems to be related from what I can make out."

"They always are, in small villages," Merrion remarked. "And I might point out that if Foxcroft starts by asking Mabel about the stick, it's bound to get to the ears of the Cecils."

"Ah, but he didn't," Arnold agreed. "He's quite a lad, is Foxcroft. He started by asking Mabel if she knew whether Dr Mountwell had taken an umbrella with her when she went out on Wednesday afternoon. Of course, she didn't know, for she hadn't seen the doctor go out. But she said that Foxcroft could easily tell. There was a painted drainpipe in the front hall at Foursquare, in which the household kept their sticks and umbrellas. If he looked them over and found Dr Mountwell's umbrella, she hadn't take it out with her."

"That gave Foxcroft the chance he wanted. He asked Mabel what he might expect to find in the drainpipe, and how he was to know Dr. Mountwell's umbrella if he saw it. She told him that there were usually two umbrellas there, one belonging to Mrs. Cecil and one to Dr Mountwell, and she described them both. And she said that there were two there as well, both belonging to Dr Cecil, one with a straight handle and one with a curved handle. She was quite

comes a gap which we must try to fill. It's absolutely essential that we should find out with some sort of accuracy when she arrived at Folly Farm. If she had walked straight from Quenbies, which I know she didn't, she should have got there by a quarter to six at the latest."

"You seem to know the dickens of a lot," said Arnold suspiciously. "This isn't all the product of your imagination, is it?"

"Everything I've told you, you can confirm for yourself," Merrion replied. "Now I'm going to pass on to the mystery of the silver wrist-watch, which isn't a mystery at all. Miss Draper found it on the surgery table at half-past six, with the glass broken, and the hands stopped at nine minutes past five. She supposed that Dr. Mountwell had left it there when she went out."

"But she can't have!" Arnold exclaimed. "Sir Mark saw it on her wrist when she was here."

"Exactly. Now wait a minute. I've had a chat with a charming lady whom I hope you'll find it necessary to interrogate. If you do, I shall certainly be there to see the fun. She lives at Quenbies, and her name is Mrs. Burwash. It was on her that Dr. Mountwell called after she left here. And she told me that when Dr. Mountwell entered the house, she showed her wrist-watch which she had broken in opening the iron gate. Mrs. Burwash lent her a diamond one which, by the way, she wants back. And it was by the time when the silver watch had stopped that I know when Dr. Mountwell got to Quenbies. The rest ought to be clear enough."

"It may be to you," said Arnold. "But I don't quite see what you're driving at."

"I'm trying to trace Dr. Mountwell's movements after she left Quenbies, which we can put at half-past five. You've got some idea of the lay-out of Foursquare, I suppose?"

"Yes. Foxcroft drew me a rough plan of the house and another of the grounds," Arnold replied.

"Very well. Here are one or two details which you may find useful to add to your plan. The surgery and the dispensary are in a separate wing. There are two means of access to this wing, a baize door communicating with the rest of the house, and an outer door, known as the surgery door, and used by the patients. This door has two keys, of which Dr. Mountwell had one and Miss Draper has the other. Got that?"

Arnold nodded and Merrion continued. "The rest is only a matter of comparing times. Get out your note-book and put

down as I give them to you. Most of them are only approximate, but they'll do for our present purpose. 2.30 p.m. Dr. Mountwell starts out on her rounds, leaving Miss Draper in the dispensary. 4.10 p.m. Miss Draper goes out, having been asked by Dr. Mountwell to deliver some medicines, and locks the surgery door behind her. 4.40 p.m. Dr. and Mrs. Cecil return to Foursquare. 5 p.m. Dr. Mountwell leaves here with the silver watch intact. Corringham saw her comparing it with the drawing-room clock. 5.10 p.m. Dr. Mountwell arrives at Quenbies with the silver watch broken and stopped at a minute earlier. 5.30 p.m. Dr. Mountwell leaves Quenbies with the diamond watch lent her by Mrs. Burwash."

Merrion paused. "I'd leave a good wide gap there, if I were you," he went on. "I fancy there'd be quite a lot to fill in before the next event we know of. That occurred at 6.10 p.m., when Miss Draper came back to Foursquare, opening the surgery door with a key. 6.20 p.m. Roland comes into the dispensary by way of the baize door, having failed to find his parents in the house. 6.30 p.m. Miss Draper goes into the surgery and finds the silver watch on the table there. Now then, what's the first thing that's obvious from those notes?"

"That the silver watch found its way into the surgery between 5.30 and 6.30," Arnold replied.

"We can narrow it down farther than that. The watch didn't fly into the surgery of its own volition. Someone must have put it there. While Miss Draper was in the dispensary, nobody could have entered the surgery without her knowledge. So the watch must have been put on the table between 5.30 and 6.10. And, I don't see how any one but Dr. Mountwell can have put it there. The outer surgery door was locked during that period, remember, and only she and Miss Draper had a key to it. In other words, Dr. Mountwell went back to Foursquare between 5.30 and 6.10. Where were the three members of the Cecil family during that period? Did she meet any of them, and if so did she mention that her next visit would be to Folly Farm?"

"I see what you're getting at," Arnold replied. "We know from Sir Mark that Dr. and Mrs. Cecil got home at 4.40. But, according to you, Roland couldn't find them in the house at 6.20."

"It isn't according to me. That's what Roland told Miss Draper, but we've got no confirmation of his statement. We don't know when he got home, or what he did after his arrival. As a sidelight on that, there seems to be very little doubt that

Roland and Miss Draper understand one another pretty well. However, I'm satisfied that what she told me was the truth.

"Now, there's another point. A duplicate list of the calls Dr. Mountwell had to make lay on the surgery table from 2.30 onwards. Any one who had access to it would learn that Dr. Mountwell's last call that afternoon would be at Folly Farm. Now, who could have gained access to it? As I've already pointed out, while Miss Draper was about nobody could have entered the surgery without her knowledge. When she went out she locked the outer surgery door behind her, and nobody but she or Dr. Mountwell could have got in that way. On the other hand, any one in the house could have reached the surgery unobserved by the baize door at any time between 4.10 and 6.10."

"That points to the Cecils again," Arnold remarked.

"Yes, but to which of them? We can't suppose they'd made a family compact to murder the woman. To my mind, Roland seems the most likely. In that case, his mother may have had some inkling of what he was up to. But he certainly wouldn't have taken his father into his confidence. And now the best thing I can do is to take you for a good brisk walk. The exercise will do you good."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THEY WENT OUT together and at Merrion's suggestion called first at Foxcroft's house. The constable was not at home, but Mrs. Foxcroft produced Dr. Mountwell's attaché-case, which had been deposited there. In it they found a list of names and addresses, each of which had been ticked off in pencil. Cryptic symbols had been written against most of them, and these no doubt were in the nature of shorthand notes by the doctor. The last entry on the list was "Marjorie Olliver, Folly Farm." Above this Merrion recognised all the names which Eileen Draper had mentioned and several more.

In the course of further conversation with Mrs. Foxcroft, it transpired that for the last two mornings she had been helping at Foursquare, during the absence of Sarah Hawthorne. Mrs. Cecil had come to see her on Wednesday afternoon and begged her to help as Dr. Cecil had come home and there was nobody but Mabel to do the work.

It struck Merrion as significant that Mrs. Cecil had said that

her husband had come home, and not that he was expected. "What time on Wednesday afternoon did Mrs. Cecil come to see you?" he asked.

"About a quarter to six," Mrs. Foxcroft replied. "I know that, for my husband came in a few minutes afterwards and it was just on six then. Mrs. Cecil wasn't here very long. As soon as I told her that I'd come round in the morning and help with the cleaning she went out."

Arnold and Merrion left the cottage, taking the list with them. "That's an entry to go in the gaps in your list of times," said the latter. "5.45 Mrs. Cecil calls on Mrs. Foxcroft. It's not very enlightening as it stands, for we don't know when Mrs. Cecil left Foursquare or when she got back there again. Come along and we'll make the circuit I did this morning."

They walked round the wall of Foursquare, Merrion pointing out the difficulty of climbing it without the help of a ladder. "And I can't believe that on a light evening any one would attempt the job with a ladder," he said. "The risk of being seen would have been too great. There's only one place where an agile climber could have managed it, and there is a dog tied up within a dozen yards of that. I'll show you."

The dog ran out of his kennel and barked noisily as they stopped outside the Hawthornes' cottage. At the sound a woman came out and stared at them suspiciously, so much so that Merrion thought it as well to suggest some explanation of their presence. "Good-afternoon," he said politely. "This is where Bert Hawthorne lives, isn't it? Is he at home?"

"No, sir, he's gone down the village in his chair," the woman replied. "There's only his sister Sarah at home, and she's in bed. I've just come from over the way to see to her. I'm Tom Docking's wife, him that's gardener at the doctor's house."

"I'm very glad to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Docking," said Merrion. "How is Sarah Hawthorne getting on?"

"Not so bad," Mrs. Docking replied. "She's been a bit better since Dr. Cecil's come home. She wouldn't have Dr. Mountwell to see her when she was first taken bad."

"That was rather foolish of her," Merrion remarked. "It's always best to see the doctor as early as possible. And as she works at Foursquare, she must have known Dr. Mountwell well enough to send for her. But perhaps she didn't like her?"

"It wasn't a matter of liking or not liking. Sarah doesn't

hold with lady doctors, that's what it is. She says that if they know all about people's insides, they oughtn't to, that's all."

"Well, I hope she'll soon be better," said Merrion. "By the way, Mrs. Docking, you didn't see Dr. Mountwell by the Green here between half-past five and six on Wednesday evening, did you?"

Mrs. Docking shook her head. "I shouldn't be likely to see any one about that time," she replied. "You see, Tom comes home at half-past five or very soon after, and I'd be either getting his tea or we'd be having it in the kitchen. And it's black-out time soon after six."

"That was a very good point of Mrs. Docking's," said Merrion as they went on their way. "However light it may be outside, the black-out has to go up at the time ordained, and once it's up people can't see out of their windows. If Dr. Mountwell came this way, it's more than likely that nobody saw her. Or rather nobody who wasn't definitely on the look-out for her."

"What makes you think she came this way?" Arnold asked.

"It's the shortest. So far as I can see it, this is what happened. She left Quenbies, with only one more call to make. But from there she had to pass the entrance to Foursquare on her way to Folly Farm, whichever way she went, by the lane or by the short-cut over the fields. This being so, she thought she might just as well leave the broken watch in the surgery."

"We don't know how long she was at Foursquare, and it's a point we must try to get settled. Sooner or later she started for Folly Farm. The weather was quite dry and it was light enough all the evening for her to use the short-cut. We know that she was looking, and she probably felt, pretty tired. Wouldn't it be natural for her to take the shortest way? Anyhow, that's the way we're going to take."

With the ground hardened by frost, the path across the fields was easy enough going, with only a couple of low styles to negotiate. They reached the farm, where they found Mr. Olliver at work in the yard with a couple of his men. But none of them could throw any light upon the time of Dr. Mountwell's arrival on the previous Wednesday. Of the two men, one, Frank Ribstone, who lived on the Green, had gone home on foot just before six by way of the short-cut, but had seen nothing of her. The other, who lived in the centre of the village, had started for home a few minutes after six on his bicycle, by way of the lane. He had seen nothing of Dr.

Mountwell either. But he had seen Mrs Cecil, who was going into the Foursquare drive by the main entrance as he passed. This must have been between ten minutes and a quarter-past six.

Mr. Olliver was of no more help than his two men. Soon after they had gone home, Bob Tipping had finished his job of fixing up the pump. After that they had both gone into the cart-shed to look at the bicycle. Mr Olliver had left Bob there and done a few things about the place, shutting the ducks up for the night, and so on. He hadn't gone inside until after Dr. Mountwell had been and gone. The gentlemen had better go in and have a word with the missus.

But Mrs. Olliver, who had already been questioned on this very point, was still vague. "I can't tell you any more than I told Mr Foxcroft and the sergeant yesterday," she said. "I didn't take any particular notice of what time the doctor came or went. After she'd come down from seeing my daughter I asked her if she wouldn't like to stop and have a cup of tea and a rest, she looked that tired. But she said she was late for her surgery hour as it was, and that she'd have to hurry back, and she had a letter she wanted to catch the post as well."

"She was already late for her 'surgery hour'?" Merrion remarked. "Now, Mrs Olliver, I expect you're pretty careful about blacking out aren't you?"

"You may be sure of that," she replied. "My husband's a warden and he's on to me sharp enough if there's a crack of light to be seen after the proper time. I make sure that the curtains are drawn between six and a quarter-past at this time of the year. And I remember now that when the doctor came on Wednesday they'd been drawn some little time."

Mrs Olliver was unable to give them any further information, and after some further conversation they left Folly Farm. "The black-out has its uses, you see," said Merrion as they set out along the lane. "Quite a lot of people never worry their heads about time in the ordinary way, and Mrs Olliver seems to be one of them. But it's been driven into them at last to be careful about black-out time. So, in this case, we get a clue to Dr. Mountwell's movements. I think we can take it that she reached Folly Farm between 5.15 and 6.30 and left between 6.30 and 6.45. Two more items for your time-table."

"It's near enough, I suppose," Arnold replied. "It's as near as we're likely to get, anyhow. Now, I'd like you to notice this. If Dr Mountwell had walked from Quenbies to Foursquare, stayed there only long enough to

leave her watch and then walked on to Folly Farm, she would have got there by a quarter to six at the latest. But it seems pretty certain that she can't have got there before a quarter-past. Where did she spend the half-hour, or possibly longer, that we can't account for? At Foursquare?"

"Stop a minute while I look over the times again," said Arnold as he produced his note-book. "The missing half-hour was somewhere between 5 30 and 6 30. We'll suppose that Dr. Mountwell went straight to Foursquare from Querbies, and that she got there at 5 35. Miss Draper says that she came in at 6 10 but that she didn't see her. She must have gone out again before that."

"Not necessarily," Arnold replied. "She may have gone through the baize doorway into the main part of the house, in which case Miss Draper wouldn't have seen her. That is supposing that she left by the front door and not the surgery entrance. If she didn't get to Folly Farm much before half-past six, she needn't have left Foursquare till 6 20."

"Which is just the time Roland couldn't find any one about," Arnold remarked.

"That's what he said. The point is this. If she wasn't at Foursquare, where can she have been? It was getting on for her surgery hour and all accounts agree that she was tired. She was not likely to take a walk just for the sake of exercise or passing the time away. She had only one more call to pay, at Folly Farm. Wouldn't you have expected her to get that call over as soon as possible so that she might have a few minutes' rest before the surgery hour?"

"It sounds right enough," Arnold replied. "It looks as if she'd been detained by something."

"Or somebody. That casual remark of the chap who works at Folly Farm may be significant. He saw Mrs Cecil go in by the drive gate of Foursquare between 6 10 and 6 15. We know that before then she had been to see Mrs Foxcroft. It seems that it can't have been Mrs Cecil who detained her. But where were Dr Cecil and young Roland at the time?"

"We don't know yet, but I'm hoping that we very soon shall. But I don't see that it matters very much where any of them were between half-past five and half-past six. We want to know where they were at a quarter to seven, which is about the time when Dr Mountwell was killed."

"That's true enough. But I'd like to clear up that half-hour. It's quite likely that in the course of it Dr Mountwell met somebody and told them where she was going. I

got to call at Folly Farm, but I shan't be very long,' or something like that. I think we're agreed that whoever killed her must have known that she would come along Folly Farm Lane, and about the time when she might be expected to do so.

"However, we'll leave that for a moment, for there's another thing to which I want to draw your attention. That is, the evidence we have of her being genuinely liked in the village, by various members of the community. Three entirely different types of people, Lady Corringham, Mrs Burwash and Mrs Olliver, each noticed that she looked tired on Wednesday afternoon and wanted to do something about it. Mrs. Burwash went so far as to lend her a valuable diamond watch, with the intention of asking her to keep it, and Mrs Burwash strikes me as one who rations the milk of human kindness very strictly. These people wouldn't have behaved as they did if they had regarded Dr. Mountwell with the same sentiments as they regarded Wiegler."

"Which all goes to show that it was one of the Cecils," Arnold remarked.

"I know it does. And that's the line our inquiries have got to take. Hallo, who's this?"

They had resumed their walk along the lane, and had almost reached the spot where the wall of Foursquare began. Merrion's exclamation was evoked by the appearance of a figure turning into the lane by the pillar-box, and advancing towards them. "It's the parson, Canon Laverock," he continued after a second or two. "It might pay us to have a word with him. We have it on good authority that he was at Foursquare about seven o'clock on Wednesday evening. Let's wait here. I don't like that wall. One never knows who may be behind it."

They stayed where they were until the rector came up. He recognised Merrion, having met him on the occasion of his previous visit to Exton Forcett, and Arnold, having seen him at the inquest that morning. "Good-afternoon, gentlemen, good-afternoon," he greeted them. "Pleasant weather, is it not? You have been to Folly Farm, perhaps? I am on my way there to see Marjorie Olliver. I always make a point of visiting my parishioners when they are ill."

Merrion was amused at the care with which every one to whom they spoke avoided any reference to the tragedy. The village, he knew, must be buzzing with rumour and speculation like a swarm of angry bees. But, with rustic caution,

nobody wanted to discuss the matter with a stranger. The very mention of it might suggest some sinister knowledge on their part. Better keep off the subject, and talk of anything else.

"That's very considerate of you, Rector," said Merrion. "But then you're very punctilious in the matter of paying visits, I'm given to understand. You were one of the very first to welcome Dr Cecil home on Wednesday afternoon, were you not?"

"I certainly took the earliest opportunity I could of doing so," Canon Laverock replied, not ill-pleased at the compliment. "My wife and I were having tea at Exton House that day, and while we were there Sir Mark came in and told us that he had just driven St. John and Hermione home from Marbeach Station. I made up my mind then that I would offer him a few words of welcome at the earliest opportunity."

"Dr Cecil must have appreciated your kindness, I'm sure," said Merrion with becoming gravity. "At what time on Wednesday afternoon did the opportunity occur?"

"My wife had a lot of business to talk about to Lady Corringham, and we did not leave Exton House until nearly seven," the rector replied. "Indeed, as we passed the church, the clock struck the hour. My wife went into the rectory to supervise the preparation of our supper while I went on to Foursquare. There I found St John surrounded by his family, Hermione, and most unexpectedly, Roland. It really was a most charming spectacle of domestic reunion."

"I have no doubt that it was," said Merrion. "When you say that you found them there you mean that they were already assembled when you arrived?"

"Why, yes," the rector replied. "I did not ring the bell, for I wished to give as little trouble as possible, and I myself a sufficiently old friend of the family to enter the house unannounced. When I opened the drawing-room door, there were the three of them, father, mother and son, united again after so long a parting. And a few minutes later Eileen Draper looked in. A charming little woman, so quiet and self-effacing. I was most touched by my experience."

Merrion could think of no suitable comment to make on this. "Did you stay long?" he asked.

"St John went out of the room with Eileen Draper," the rector replied. "After that I only stayed long enough to congratulate Hermione and Roland on his safe return. I cannot have been at Foursquare more than ten minutes in all. And after my visit I went straight home."

They parted with mutual good wishes and went on their way, Canon Laverock towards Holly Farm and Merfion and Arnold towards the village. "Do you suppose he knows anything?" the latter asked after they had gone a few paces.

"I don't suppose he knows anything," Merfion replied. "But unless he's got a vacuum where his brain ought to be, he must be thinking a lot. It's common knowledge by now that whoever hit Dr. Mountwell was hidden behind that wall. And the difficulties of getting over it from the outside must be as obvious to the parson as they are to us. But I expect he'll be careful to say nothing that might lead to the hanging of a native for the murder of a stranger."

"What in the world do you mean?" Arnold asked.

"Exactly what I say. You're a Londoner, and your excursions to the country are brief and infrequent. I, on the other hand, live in a place very much like this, and have learnt to understand the atmosphere. I'll go so far as to say this. I don't for a moment suppose that any one here, even among the members of the jury, was absolutely and definitely convinced that Wiegler's death was accidental. But nobody was inclined to look too closely beneath the surface."

"From all I've heard, Dr. Wiegler was generally disliked, and nobody was genuinely sorry when he was killed," said Arnold. "But, as you've just said yourself, every one seems to have liked Dr. Mountwell. It's ridiculous to suppose that there's a conspiracy to shield her murderer."

"Possibly not definitely to shield him, but certainly not unduly to help the police. The very fact that people avoid the subject when talking to us is enough to show me which way the wind blows. They don't want to reveal any sign of their suspicions. It's all very well to say that Dr. Mountwell's case is quite different from Wiegler's. Popular or unpopular, they were both strangers, whereas Dr. Cecil was born here and is therefore a native."

"I can't see what difference that makes," Arnold persisted stubbornly.

"Perhaps you can't, but the instinct's there all the same. It's impossible to explain logically, for the countryman doesn't think logically about that sort of thing. He's suspicious of all strangers, mainly, I think, because their ways, their manners, their outlook are unfamiliar to him. Because he can't quite understand them, he's always ready to attribute to them some ulterior motive. Wiegler was a case in point. He was of foreign origin, had a foreign name and watched birds through

binoculars. These things being unfamiliar, they must have some sinister purpose, and he was popularly believed to be a spy. I shouldn't be at all surprised if some similar legend was not growing round Dr. Mountwell. For instance, that she was in some way responsible for the influenza epidemic. You may laugh, but I've come across even more absurd beliefs than that."

"You mean to say that if any one here had definite evidence against the Cecils, he'd keep it to himself?"

"I mean to say that local opinion would consider the execution of a native too high a price to pay for the murder of a stranger. We've got to rely on our own efforts, without expecting too much help from other people. What's your next move going to be?"

"We're going to interview Dr. Cecil at half-past five," Arnold replied. "The sergeant, Foxcroft and I. We made the appointment with him after the inquest. We put it to him that the four of us ought to have a conference to discuss the affair. I don't see why you shouldn't be there too if you like."

But Merrion shook his head. "In what capacity?" he asked. "You might find my presence difficult to explain. Dr. Cecil started asking questions. I'd rather keep out of it."

At precisely half-past five Arnold, Briston and Foxcroft marched up to Foursquare and were shown by Mabel into the dining-room. A minute or two later St. John Cecil appeared and nodded to them good-humouredly. "Let's sit down round the table," he said. "I thought we'd better meet in this room, where we shan't be disturbed. That's right. You'd better act as chairman of the conference, hadn't you Inspector?"

"Perhaps that would be best," Arnold agreed. "We all heard the formal evidence given at the inquest, which was adjourned pending further evidence being obtained. The first thing for us is to form some idea of how the wound which caused Dr. Mountwell's death was inflicted. Have you any remarks to make on that point, Dr. Cecil?"

"I can say no more than I said this morning," St. John replied. "In plain language, the top of the poor girl's head was broken in. If death was not immediate, it must have occurred very rapidly. In any case the impact would have rendered her unconscious and incapable of movement."

"Are the injuries such as might have been inflicted by a blow from some heavy object?"

"That's the only way they could have been inflicted," St.

John replied. "It's the most extraordinary thing to me Foxcroft will tell you that there was no sign of anything having fallen on her. It looks to me very much as if she had been deliberately knocked on the head by somebody."

"In other words, that she was murdered," said Arnold. "Can you suggest any possible motive for such a crime?"

St John shook his head. "You must remember that I've been away from this place for nearly two years and that I only got back a short time before Dr Mountwell was killed. I never so much as set eyes on Dr Mountwell until I was sent for after her death. She was a perfect stranger to me, and I haven't the slightest idea why any one should want to kill her."

"I quite understand, Dr Cecil," said Arnold. "You got home, I believe, about twenty minutes to four that afternoon. There is some evidence that Dr Mountwell came to this house at some time between half-past five and half-past six. Can you throw any light upon that?"

"I'm afraid I can't. If she came here, I didn't see her. You'd better ask Eileen Draper, my secretary and dispenser. I'll go and fetch her, if you like."

"Miss Draper was out and did not come back until after six. I hoped that you or Mrs Cecil might be able to clear up the point, which is really rather important."

"I can't and I don't suppose that Hermione can either. I'll tell you exactly what we did after I got home and you'll see why. Corringham took her to Marbeach Station to meet me and drove us back here. We got in at about twenty to five, had tea and chatted for a bit. Then, about half-past five, we both went out. Hermione went to see Mrs Foxcroft and I wandered round the place to see how it had been getting on while I've been away."

"You walked about the grounds, you mean?" Arnold asked.

"Exactly. I may say that I walked right round them. There's a path running all the way inside the wall, and the first thing I did was to go along that. I found it terribly overgrown and neglected, but I suppose that sort of thing can't be helped in war-time. When I asked Tom Docking my gardener about it, he said that he'd more than enough to do in the vegetable garden. And he went off into a long story about my first locum having found fault with him for not keeping the place better, and all that sort of thing."

"Did you have this conversation with Docking on Wednesday afternoon, Doctor?" Arnold asked.

"No. He'd gone home by the time I'd gone round the long

walk as we call it, and I didn't see him till next day. . . going round the walk, I had a look at the greenhouse and the vegetable garden. While I was pottering about there, I saw my wife coming up the drive, and called to her. She told me where she'd been and took me along to the paddock. She's got an idea that it ought to be ploughed up and sown with potatoes or wheat or something. When we'd had a look at that, she went back towards the house while I went to see what sort of shape the flower-garden was in. While I was there, who should come along but my son Roland, who'd come home unexpectedly, and had been hunting for us everywhere. We strolled back to the house together and found that his mother had just come in."

"Do you know what time it was when your son joined you?" Arnold asked.

"Not accurately," St. John replied. "It was a ma. evening, cold and bright, and the moon was well up. It almost as clear as daylight. As I say, Roland and I stro back to the house together and found Hermione in the drawing-room. We hadn't been there more than a couple of minutes when the rector came in, to welcome me home, as he put it. Then in came Eileen, to say that Dr. Mountwell hadn't come back from her rounds. So I went with her and saw one or two patients in the surgery. When we'd finished, it was time for dinner. And we were still in the dining-room when Bob Tipping came with his message."

Arnold took out his note-book and made a pretence of glancing through the pages. "Thank you, Doctor," he said. "I'm just looking to see if there is anything else I want to ask you. Oh, yes. Have you lost a walking-stick since you've come home?"

"Lost a walking-stick?" St. John repeated. "No, I don't think so. By Jove, though, that reminds me. I've left one about. A very old favourite of mine, that I've had ever since I was up at Cambridge. I must fetch it in, for I wouldn't like to lose it after all these years."

"What sort of a stick is it?" Arnold asked.

"A straight bit of ash with a knobbed end. I picked it of the stand in the hall as I went out into the garden Wednesday evening. While I was looking round the kitchen-garden I saw that Docking hadn't opened up a trench to the early peas in. So I looked for a likely piece of ground stuck the stick in, to mark where the end of the trench was be. I meant to tell Docking about it next day, but with all

happening, I clean forgot about it And I haven't thought of the stick from that moment to this I've been too busy."

"Shall we go and see if the stick is still there?" Arnold suggested

St. John raised no objection to this, and the four of them tramped out into the garden. He led them to the extreme end of the vegetable-garden, where there was a stretch of unoccupied and roughly dug ground Here the second inner wall, on which the fruit trees were trained, ended, and there was nothing between the Long Walk and the garden but a low box-hedge

"That's the place for a row of early peas," said St. John, "plenty of sun, and fairly sheltered from the north I rammed the stick into the ground just inside that box-hedge, and fairly hard the ground was, I remember But it's not there now."

"Can you show us the exact place where you planted the stick, Doctor?" Arnold asked

"Yes, I think so, if you walk across to the Long Walk Yes, there you are, look!" And he pointed to a hole, three or four inches deep, and of the diameter of an average walking-stick.

"That's where I put in the stick. I meant the trench to run from that point across the vacant ground. Docking must have pulled out the stick, not knowing what it was doing there, and put it away somewhere"

"In which case you'll get it back again," Arnold remarked. "You planted the stick before you saw Mrs. Cecil coming up the drive, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes, I'm sure I did I must have, for you notice you can't see the drive from just here Then I strolled back, looking at those rows of green stuff over there, and so to the greenhouse I was just coming out of there when I saw Hermione"

"And it was some minutes afterwards that your son made his appearance?"

"Quite a long time, half an hour perhaps He told me that he'd got home just before half-past six and couldn't find any one about Hermione and I were out here, of course. He waited indoors for a bit, then wandered out to look for us and found me in the flower-garden."

"Miss Draper was in when your son came home?" Arnold suggested "But perhaps it didn't occur to him to ask her where you were."

St John smiled. "I dare say he had a word with Eileen, though he didn't tell us so. He wouldn't, for reasons which I

needn't enter into But if he did see Eileen, she couldn't told him where we were She hadn't seen either of us since got home "

" Well, we seem to have wandered away from the subject rather," said Arnold. " We were inquiring whether any one saw Dr Mountwell when she came back here before she went to Folly Farm."

" I didn't, and I don't see how Hermione or Roland can have either, for they would have said so if they had. Hermione didn't go indoors for some time after she came back from seeing Mrs Foxcroft And Roland didn't get here until nearly half-past six. He got a lift from Marbeach on a lorry which dropped him at Exton House lodge, and he walked the rest of the way "

" Thank you, Doctor," Arnold replied. " We won't trouble you any more just now I know you're very busy, and it's getting on for your surgery hour We'll take ourselves off."

The three policemen took their leave of St. John, walked briskly away in the gathering dusk " Well, which of them was it ? " Arnold asked " Your turn first, Sergeant."

" Well, sir, I don't know for sure," Briston replied doubtfully " But if Mrs Cecil went into the house after she left the doctor, why didn't she meet Mr. Roland ? "

" Perhaps she did," said Arnold " And you, Foxcroft ? "

" I'm thinking the same as the sergeant, sir," Foxcroft replied " It's true enough that Mrs Cecil saw my missus not long before six that evening And I've had word about Mr. Roland, too He was seen getting out of the lorry at the lodge about a quarter-past six And Mrs Burwash saw him go to her place a few minutes later, on the way towards Foursquare. Trust Mrs Burwash to be in that front garden of hers, even after black-out time And what I want to know is, where was Mr Roland after that until he met the doctor ? "

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

" AND SO, it seems to me, any one of the three may have it," Arnold said " Even if we accept Dr. Cecil's statement : gospel truth, it doesn't carry us much farther."

He, Merrion and Corringham were sitting in the library at Exton House that evening Corringham had suggested he should leave his guests to talk the matter over in and both of them had begged him to stay. So Arnold

described his interview with St John Cecil, and the various statements made in the course of it.

"How far did you get the impression that Dr. Cecil was telling you the truth?" Merrion asked

"I'm bound to say that most of it rang true enough," Arnold replied. "Take the stick, for instance. He told us, without being asked, that he had taken it out into the garden with him. And another thing that struck me was that he made no attempt to establish an alibi for the critical few minutes. We've fixed it as nearly as possible that Dr Mountwell was killed round about a quarter to seven. And we've no evidence where exactly any one of the three was just at that time."

"Yes, any one of them may have done it," Merrion agreed. "They all had equal opportunity of finding out that Dr. Mountwell's last call would be at Folly Farm. Dr or Mrs Cecil could have entered the surgery while Miss Draper was out and studied the list lying on the table there. Although he didn't tell his parents, the first thing Roland did on reaching Foursquare was to look in on Miss Draper in the dispensary. So at least she told me, and I think we can accept her statement. He may have peeped into the surgery then

"This morning I noticed that from the angle of the wall nearest to Folly Farm it is possible to see not only the farm itself, but both approaches to it, the lane and the path across the fields. And yesterday evening, when I climbed over the wall, I found that the ground level inside it was much higher than it was outside. Any one on the Long Walk, on that section of it bordering the paddock, could see over the wall. And I imagine that if he stood on the walk at the corner, he would see as much as I could from outside. Isn't that so, Corringham?"

"Yes, you're quite right," Corringham replied. "That corner is the only place on the Long Walk from which one can see very much of the country outside the wall, but at that point there is rather a fine view. So much so, that Theodore Cecil, St John's father, often talked of having a gazebo built there, but he never did."

"Very well," said Merrion. "Any one standing at that point from about half-past six onwards would have seen Dr. Mountwell leaving Folly Farm. Ten minutes or so later she would have reached the spot where she was killed. The distance from the corner to this spot is barely a hundred yards. Crouching behind the wall, the watcher would have been

invisible from the lane, and from any part of the grounds except the paddock. We are told that Dr and Mrs. Cecil inspected the paddock that evening, but they seem to have left it before half-past six."

"According to Dr Cecil, they must have left it several minutes before," Arnold remarked.

"Then, at the critical time, the coast was clear," Merrion replied. "It seems quite possible that any one of the three may have gone up the Long Walk towards the corner, finding on the way Dr Cecil's stick so conveniently planted at the edge of it. It may have been Dr. Cecil, after his wife had left him to go towards the house. It may have been Mrs Cecil, who, after going towards the house, turned into the Long Walk behind the kitchen garden wall. It may have been Roland who, after his visit to the dispensary, entered the walk at the same place.

"The motive is still obscure. I can't believe that it originated solely in Mrs. Cecil's dislike of Dr. Mountwell. I can't think of any better theory than that Dr. Mountwell had discovered something, the revelation of which would be disastrous to the Cecils. It may have been that she had evidence that Roland murdered Wiegler, though how she could have come by that evidence I don't quite understand."

"If we can prove the deed, the motive won't matter," Arnold remarked grimly.

"That's true enough," Merrion replied. "But you haven't proved it as yet. And I don't see how you're ever going to prove it. You've got a mass of circumstantial evidence, but unfortunately it applies with equal force against any one of three people. Of course, if you take Wiegler's death into consideration, the balance of probability swings towards Roland as the criminal."

"That balance would hardly be accepted as evidence by any court," said Corringham.

"I know. And that's why Arnold hasn't a leg to stand on, so far. But we're not a court of law, and we're justified in weighing the probabilities. I know, just as surely that I know that the three of us are sitting here, that Wiegler was murdered, though I don't pretend to know who murdered him. And I find it difficult to believe that the two murders are entirely independent and unconnected. The similarity is too marked. In both cases the cause of death was the same, a blow on the head from what Arnold would call a blunt weapon. And in both cases the victim was acting as Dr. Cecil's locum."

"You mean that both murders were committed by the same person?" Arnold suggested.

"It seems to me highly probable," Merrion replied. "Though not necessarily for the same reason. As you know, my theory is that the second murder was a sequel to the first."

"When Wiegler was murdered St. John was in the Middle East," said Corringham. "And there is very good evidence that Hermione did not leave Foursquare that afternoon."

"Which facts point to Roland, as I hinted just now. But there are many excellent reasons why his prosecution would be bound to fail. We know the case against him. Now let's look at it from the point of view of the defence. If I were his counsel I should take this line. The prosecution make a great point of the fact that at the time Dr. Mountwell is assumed to have been killed, the paddock and the approach to it were not under observation. From that they argue that Roland could have reached the wall without being seen. But it can be argued with equal force that some other person could have done so, other than any member of the Cecil family."

"I don't agree with you there," Arnold replied. "You were the first to point out the difficulties in the way of any outsider having got inside the grounds."

"The difficulties exist, certainly, but the impossibility doesn't. It isn't absolutely impossible that someone slipped in by one or other of the entrances, or climbed the wall, or dropped from a parachute. You'd have to prove conclusively that none of these things could by any chance have happened, and that you can't do. The extreme unlikelihood of any of them having happened isn't good enough. Don't you agree, Corringham?"

"I do, especially as the evidence against Roland could only be circumstantial. Another weakness of the prosecution would be their failure to adduce any motive. They couldn't advance your theory that he murdered Wiegler, and Alida was aware of the fact, for they couldn't produce a tittle of evidence in support of it. And though I'm very well aware that it isn't necessary to prove motive in order to secure a conviction, I do know that a lack of motive weighs very heavily indeed with a jury."

Merrion nodded. "That's very true. I'm bound to admit that my theory is purely speculative. But if you reject it, where are you? You've got to face the impossible situation that, while the Cecils had opportunity they had no motive, and while some other person may have had motive, they had

did all he could for him. But I've sometimes wondered whether special treatment wouldn't have saved him from being a cripple for life."

"Dr Cecil's methods not being fully up to date?" Merrion suggested.

"St. John's a very good chap, but I've often suspected that he's not the world's most brilliant doctor," Corringham replied. "There was a bit of a fuss about the accident, of course. Plowman's affairs were in the usual muddle at the time. It seems that he wasn't properly insured against that kind of liability. It wouldn't have been the slightest good taking him into court, for he hadn't got the means to pay a lump sum in damages. In the end he agreed to pay Bert a pension of four pounds a week for life. Bert wheels himself along to Mafeking to collect his money every Saturday afternoon, I believe. He certainly did on the Saturday Wiegler was killed."

"How long before the event, Sir Mark?" Arnold asked.

"Oh, some time before," Corringham replied. "A couple of hours or so, I should think. Bert's visit to Mafeking doesn't provide Plowman with an alibi. It was after that Bert wheeled himself along to the corner of Mill Lane. You've told Mr. Arnold about the red-haired stranger, I expect?"

"Yes, I've told him that story," Merrion replied. "I suppose it would have been possible for Plowman to get to that gravel-pit without Bert seeing him?"

"He could have done so perfectly easily. It isn't necessary to go up Mill Lane in order to get into Gallows Wood. There are a dozen other ways which Bert couldn't have overlooked. And there's no denying that Plowman had an excellent reason for silencing Wiegler. An exposure of his behaviour in the matter of the shelter would not only have ruined him, but sent him to jail in the bargain."

"Apart from that, the two men were on very bad terms. Wiegler was the sort of chap who was always seeking quarrels, and he'd fixed one on Plowman over another accident to one of his men, Fred Sambourne, which happened about a fortnight before Wiegler was killed. Plowman had sent Fred to mend the roof at Quenbies, and had given him a rotten ladder. The result was that one of the rungs broke, and Fred fell and broke his leg. Wiegler, I understand, told Plowman just what he thought about it, and threatened him with all manner of pains and penalties."

"Was Plowman left with another pensioner on his hands?" Arnold asked.

"No. Fred was lucky, for whatever Wiegler's faults may have been, there's no doubt that he was a thunderingly clever doctor. He started the repair of the damage properly, and Alida finished it off. Fred has been back at work for some little time now."

Arnold lighted his pipe and puffed at it thoughtfully. "I can quite understand that Plowman had an excellent motive in Wiegler's case," he said. "Unfortunately, it's far too late to go back into that now. But I can't understand why on earth he should have murdered Dr Mountwell."

"Perhaps for the same reason that I suggested when we were discussing a possible motive on the part of the Cecils," Merrion replied. "Dr Mountwell may somehow have discovered that Plowman murdered her predecessor Mrs Plowman, whom it seems she was attending, may have become delirious and blurted out the whole story. That's only a pure guess, of course. I shouldn't worry about the motive, if I were you. What about the opportunity?"

Arnold frowned. "That's just the difficulty," he said. "It's quite likely that Plowman learnt that Dr Mountwell's last visit that afternoon would be to Folly Farm. But how the dickens did he get into the Foursquare grounds? He'd never have gone in by either of the gateways. And I don't suppose that anybody could climb the wall, except possibly at one spot."

"Plowman certainly couldn't have climbed it anywhere," Corringham remarked. "He's a heavy, slow-moving man, and he suffers from rheumatism. He's no climber, I assure you."

"I think I can solve that particular problem," said Merrion quietly. "You remember that place where we got over the wall yesterday evening? You're quite satisfied that there was very little chance of our being seen while we were doing it?"

"Nobody could have seen us unless they had actually come along the lane at the time," Arnold replied. "But then we had the ladder that Foxcroft left there for us. We should never have got over the wall without that, as you know well enough."

"I do know. And the assumption is that nobody intending murder would risk being seen wandering about with a ladder. But that's not quite true. The sight of a gardener carrying a spade wouldn't strike you as anything out of the ordinary. If you gave the matter any thought at all, you would suppose that he was going to or from his allotment. And in just the same way, if you saw a builder carrying a ladder, you would

suppose that he had been inspecting some building or other. I dare say Plowman is often to be seen carrying a ladder through the village."

"By Jove, Merrion, you're perfectly right!" Corringham exclaimed "I've seen him doing so myself. And, of course, in his yard at Mafeking he's got ladders of all sorts, short and long. What is more, if he went to Folly Farm Lane from the yard by way of the Green, it's more than likely that he met nobody. Most of the villagers are having their tea about that time."

"And if it was after black-out time, they would not have seen him from their windows," Merrion remarked. "I think we may say that Plowman had the opportunity. He could have taken a short ladder with him to Folly Farm Lane, and climbed the wall about where we did. Having done this, he hauled the ladder up after him and hid it behind the wall, so that it couldn't be seen from the lane. The job done, he put the ladder over again, climbed down, and carried it back home."

"That's all very well," said Arnold "But where does Dr Cecil's walking-stick come in? Plowman can't have known that it would be ready to his hand."

"Of course he can't," Merrion replied "He probably took some other weapon with him. Something that a builder might be expected to carry, such as a hammer. When he was over the wall, it would have been quite natural for him to scout round and see if there was anybody about. In so doing he may have gone along the Long Walk and spotted the walking-stick stuck in the ground. I gather that the folk here were accustomed to see Dr Cecil going around with that particular stick. Foxcroft recognised it as soon as he set eyes upon it."

"The stick put ideas into his head. If he were to use it as his weapon, and it were to be found near the spot afterwards, suspicion would be thrown upon Dr Cecil. And that's a point that's been sticking in my throat all the time. The ownership of the stick was well known. Would any member of the Cecil family have been so unutterably careless as to throw it down where it would almost certainly be found? Why not simply put it back in the drainpipe where it belonged?"

"Upon my word, Merrion, I'm beginning to believe that things aren't quite so black as they seem," Corringham exclaimed "The thought that one of the Cecils must be guilty has been a nightmare to both of us. Do you really think it's likely that it was none of them, but Simon Plowman?"

"I shouldn't like to commit myself to the extent of saying that it was probable that Plowman was the murderer," Merrion replied. "For the excellent reason that up to the present we haven't a particle of evidence against him. You'll remember how this discussion began. I took up the point of view of Roland Cecil's defending counsel. I set out to show that there were possible alternatives to my client's guilt, and I venture to think I've succeeded."

"Your imagination can be trusted to find at least a dozen explanations of any given set of facts," said Arnold severely. "The trouble is that you can't produce any sort of proof to show which is the right one. But I shall make inquiries about this man Plowman, for all that."

"I should, if I were you," Merrion replied. "I know that on the surface it looks as though Dr. Mountwell must have been murdered by one of the Foursquare household. But I don't think you can accept that appearance as a certainty. Someone might have got in, under circumstances that we haven't thought of. Or else——"

He stopped abruptly in the middle of his sentence, and sat for a full minute staring into the fire, as motionless as though suddenly turned into stone. Then with an abrupt movement he got up and began to pace the floor with slow strides, a faint smile playing about the corners of his mouth. Finally he came to a halt, laughed shortly and lighted a cigarette.

Arnold watched these movements with a sarcastic expression. "I shouldn't take any notice of him if I were you, Sir Mark," he said. "I've known him go on like this before. His imagination gets to the boiling point and bubbles over, and the fumes go to his brain. He'll be all right again soon, I expect."

But Merrion merely laughed like a child delighted with a new toy. "Maybe you're right," he said. "I've had a vision. The red-haired stranger is the clue, and Mrs. Burwash was right when she surmised that Dr. Cecil was too stupid to be murdered."

"The attack's worse than usual," Arnold remarked calmly. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"I'm talking nonsense, as usual," Merrion replied. "I say, Corringham, have you got any rabbits about the place? Four-footed ones, not innocents like Arnold here?"

"Plenty," Corringham replied. "We're always trying to keep them under. Why?"

"Good!" said Merrion. "If you'd care to lend me a gun

and a handful of cartridges, I'd go out to-morrow and try to bag a couple or so."

"Of course, with the greatest of pleasure," Corringham replied readily "I'd offer to come with you, but I promised to take my wife into Marbeach in the morning."

"Never mind I should have enjoyed your company, but it can't be helped. And Arnold will be busy making inquiries about Plowman the bullder. So I shall have to go out by myself" He yawned long and widely. "I say, isn't it about time we went to bed?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MERRION came down to breakfast next morning sneezing and blowing his nose. "I'm sorry to behave like this," he said. "I'm afraid I've caught a cold somehow. I think I shall go along and ask Dr Cecil to give me something for it. When is the best time to catch him?"

"If you go to Foursquare when you've finished breakfast, you'll find him in the surgery," Corringham replied. "He's not likely to start on his rounds before ten. I'm sorry about this. You won't be going out after the rabbits, will you? It's more than a little chilly this morning"

"Oh, yes, I shall," Merrion said "I never let a common cold interfere with my amusements. If I may, I'll go out when I come back from the doctor's"

"Of course you may I'm always glad of someone to shoot the little brutes. In case we've gone by the time you get back, I'll put a gun and some cartridges in the library for you. If you go down to the bottom of the park and work along the bank there, you're pretty certain to get a shot at them"

After breakfast, Arnold and Merrion went out together. But Merrion refused to discuss crime. "I'm giving my brain a rest this morning," he said "You can plod round and pick up information, while I pot the wily cony. But don't make any appointment for this afternoon, for I may have something to show you then. And after that you'll have to carry on by yourself. I must get back to work to-morrow morning"

With this Arnold had to be content. They parted outside Foxcroft's cottage, and Merrion went on to Foursquare. He went in by the patient's entrance and found the outer surgery door open. A couple of villagers were seated in the passage-way as he tapped on the dispensary door, which was ajar.

Eileen Draper bade him come in, and welcomed him with a smile. "Good-morning, Captain Merrion," she said, "I didn't expect to see you again so soon. What can I do for you?"

"Mix me some medicine," Merrion replied. "I've called to see the doctor. I woke up with a beastly cold this morning. Do you think he could spare a moment to see me?"

"I'm sure he could, at once. There's no one in the surgery with him now, and the two patients in the passage are only waiting for their medicine. I'll go and ask him." She came back with the news that Dr. Cecil would see him at once, and having shown him into the surgery, departed, closing the door behind her.

St. John Cecil rose and held out his hand. "I'm very glad to meet you, Captain Merrion," he said. "My boy Roland talked a lot about you while he was here. Caught cold, have you? Got to be careful with all this influenza about. Sit down and let's have a look at you."

As Merrion sat down his distressing symptoms seemed to have vanished entirely. "I've forced my way into your presence under false pretences, Dr Cecil," he replied. "My excuse is that I wanted a pretext for a private word with you. Inspector Arnold, who is here in connection with Dr. Mountwell's death, is a very old friend of mine, and I am naturally anxious to help him in every way I can."

St. John frowned slightly. "The inspector was here yesterday afternoon," he said. "But I didn't gather that his investigations so far had thrown much light on this shocking affair."

"There has been a development in the case since yesterday afternoon," Merrion replied. "Both Arnold and I know that you are particularly anxious that the matter should be cleared up and that he can count upon your help in doing so. That is why I have ventured here to ask what may seem an impertinent question. Have you taken any steps to secure another locum?"

St. John seemed surprised at this unexpected inquiry. "No, I haven't," he replied. "And between ourselves, of course, it may not be necessary. I don't know how it is in your Service, Captain Merrion, but the Army authorities have got into their heads that a man's no use after forty-five. I'm due to go before a board next week, and this morning I've had a private intimation that I'm practically certain to be bowler-batted. It's ridiculous, for I'm as fit and capable as I ever have been

in my life. But if the board decides that I'm to be chucked out, there is nothing I can do about it."

"You have my sympathy," said Merrion sincerely. "But at least you have your practice to come back to. Now, on Arnold's behalf, I am going to ask you to do something to help him. Will you meet us both at the lodge gate of Exton House at three o'clock this afternoon? He is anxious to try an experiment which may throw some light on Dr. Mountwell's death, and your presence will be most helpful. It won't take up more than an hour at most of your time."

"Why, yes, I think I can manage that," said St. John. "It'll make me a bit late on my afternoon round, but I dare say that won't matter. Three o'clock at the lodge gate, you said? Right. You may tell the inspector that I'll be there on time."

Merrion left the surgery and walked across the passage to the dispensary. "Back again, you see, Miss Draper," he said. "I'm being a perfect nuisance this morning, I know. You were telling me yesterday about your system of records. Have you still got those of the visits paid by Dr. Wiegler during the last week of his life?"

"Of course I have, Captain Merrion. I'll show them to you, if you like." She opened a filing cabinet and produced a folder containing a number of typed lists, similar to the one found in Dr. Mountwell's attaché-case. "These are the lists of visits for November. Dr. Wiegler was killed on the 13th. Would you care to see the lists for October too?"

"No, I think this will do," Merrion replied. He looked carefully through the file and then returned it to Eileen. "That's all," he said. "Ever so many thanks, Miss Draper. Now I really will take myself off. I've wasted enough of your time already."

"But what about your medicine, Captain Merrion?" she exclaimed. "Didn't Dr. Cecil prescribe any?"

"Dr. Cecil thought that nature should be allowed to take its course," Merrion replied serenely. "Good-bye, Miss Draper, and once again, ever so many thanks."

He walked back through the village, and paused when he reached Foxcroft's house. He could see no sign of either Arnold or the constable and supposed that they had gone on to investigate in Plowman's direction. But from the workshop at the back came the sound of wood being sawn, which told him that Bob Tipping was at home.

He went through the yard to the workshop, and looked

side. Bob was busy sawing a plank into strips, and looked up as his visitor blocked the light. He evidently knew who he was, for he stopped his work, and touched his cap. "Good-morning, sir," he said. "If you're looking for the inspector, he and my brother-in-law went out ten minutes ago. And my sister is over at Foursquare, helping Mrs. Cecil."

"Then we've got the place to ourselves," Merrion replied cheerfully. "I'm glad of that, for I've been wanting a chance of a word with you. It was you who found Dr. Mountwell's body, I believe. I wish you'd tell me all about it, in your own words."

Bob was obviously delighted at this chance of repeating his story. He did it at great length and with a wealth of detail, to which Merrion listened attentively, nodding his head at intervals. "That's excellent," he said at last. "I'm very glad to have had your statement at first-hand. It'll be of the greatest help to me. By the way, I see you've got a heap of shavings in the corner there. Could you spare me a bagful?"

"You can have as much as you like, sir," Bob replied. "I'm only waiting till I get time to clear it all outside and burn it. And there is an old bag under the bench, if that'll do."

"It'll do very well indeed," said Merrion. "I was telling Mr. Mark of a way of making firelighters out of a mixture of tar and wood-shavings. And now I'll be able to show him how it's done."

Between them they filled the bag, an old potato sack, with the dry, clean-smelling shavings, and after giving Bob half a crown, which he was loath to accept, Merrion carried the sack away with him. On reaching the lodge gate of Exton House, he deposited the bag and its contents behind a hedge where nobody would find it. When he reached the house he found that the Corringhams had gone out, but that the gun and cartridges were waiting for him in the library. He picked up the gun, put a handful of cartridges in his pocket and sauntered across the park towards its farther limit.

It was a bright, windless day, with the frost still keen and the ground hard. He reached the bank of which his host had spoken, and began very cautiously to work along it. But conditions were against him, and the rabbits were at least as cautious as he was, disappearing into their burrows with mocking flicks of their white scuts, before he could get near them. It was doubtful whether even Tom Docking, that prince of poachers, would have had very much luck on such a day. But Merrion persevered, and by the time the lunch-hour

was approaching he had secured a couple of rabbits for the expenditure of four shots

When he got back to the house, Sir Mark and Lady Corringham had not yet returned. He handed the rabbits over to Yates and took the gun back to the library, cleaned it and replaced it where he had found it. The cartridges he also replaced in their box, all but two, which he kept in his pocket. As he was thus engaged, Arnold came into the room. "What luck?" he asked.

"I got what I wanted," Merrion replied. "How have you got on?"

"Oh, so-so. I got hold of Foxcroft and we started making inquiries about Plowman. We found out pretty definitely that he was out between six and seven on Wednesday evening. He wasn't in the house or in the yard, that is. Dr. Mountwell called at Mafeking about four o'clock to see Mrs. Plowman, but we didn't hear that she said she was going to Folly Farm."

"Well, you'll have to take a rest from that particular line of investigation this afternoon," Merrion said. "I've made an appointment for you and me to meet Dr. Cecil at three o'clock. At your request, I'd like you to understand."

"At my request?" Arnold exclaimed. "What are you talking about? I never asked you to do anything of the kind."

"Didn't you? Then I must have dreamt it. Anyhow, the appointment is made and you'll have to keep it. The fact is, that I've got an idea and I want to try it out. If it comes off we shall be that much farther forward. If it doesn't, there'll be no harm done, and we shan't have wasted very much time. It'll be quite a simple test, you'll find."

"What's the idea?" Arnold asked. "I'd better know what's expected of me."

But Merrion shook his head. "I haven't told any one, and I don't mean to. Not because I'm unduly secretive, but because if you knew the idea beforehand you wouldn't behave naturally enough when the experiment began to develop. All I want you to do is to obey orders, whether you understand them or not. Do exactly what I tell you to do without arguing about it, and don't try to correct me if I make obviously false statements. Finally, whatever you do, don't ask silly questions, especially in front of Dr. Cecil."

After lunch Arnold and Merrion left the house and walked down the drive to the lodge gate. Merrion looked behind the hedge for the bag he had deposited, and, finding it, bent it for a moment or two before he picked it up and slung it over

his shoulder. Arnold watched these proceedings with suspicious interest. "What the dickens have you got there?" he asked. "Didn't I warn you not to ask silly questions?" Merrion replied. "Here comes the doctor. He's well on time, which is something in his favour, anyhow."

St. John Cecil came up to them. He was swinging a cherry-wood walking-stick with a curved handle and seemed in his usual good spirits. "Well, here I am, as I promised Captain Merrion I should be," he said. "What exactly do you want me to do, Inspector?"

But it was Merrion who replied to this. "The inspector wanted us both to go with him a little way along the Marbeach road. It's not quite three o'clock yet, is it?"

"It's a couple of minutes to," St. John replied. "We shall hear the church clock strike from here."

Merrion nodded, but made no move, and St. John glanced inquiringly at the bag slung over his shoulder. It looked disreputable enough, for it was full of holes through which spirals of loose shavings protruded. "May I ask what you've got there, Captain Merrion?" he asked.

Merrion glanced round. But the only other human being in sight was Bert Hawthorne propelling himself slowly in their direction. He was as yet too far away to overhear their conversation.

"Explosives!" Merrion replied in a low and confidential tone. "Explosives, wrapped up in shavings to protect them. I hope you'll both understand me when I say that for reasons of security I can't tell you where they came from. They are nothing to do with the experiment the inspector wants us to make, of course. But I'd rather take them with me than lose sight of them. They're far too dangerous to be left lying about. Bert Hawthorne's coming along this way, I see. He's just the man to put you right, Arnold."

"Yes, he'll do," Arnold replied, remembering Merrion's instructions but without the foggiest idea what he was driving at. He and St. John followed Merrion as he advanced to meet the occupant of the wheel-chair. "Good-afternoon, Bert, you've turned up at just the right moment," said Merrion. "You and Inspector Arnold haven't met before, have you? He was asking me about that red-haired stranger you saw the afternoon Dr Wiegler was killed. I dare say Dr. Cecil hasn't heard about him. We're going that way, and you can come along with us and show us just what happened. We'll help you push the chair."

Bert raised no objection. Indeed, like Bob Tipping earlier in the day, he seemed delighted at this fresh audience for his story. After all, it had never been properly appreciated at the time. It was very gratifying that these gentlemen should exhibit an interest in it.

So the curious procession started off for Mill Lane. Bert in his chair, plying the propelling handles lustily, his progress assisted by Arnold and St. John Cecil, the latter with his stick swinging gaily from his disengaged hand. And Merrion with an inscrutable face and his mysterious bag slung over his shoulder, bringing up the rear.

As they proceeded Bert told his story. It had been on a Saturday afternoon, just as this one and about the same time. He had been to see Mr. Plowman, just as he had done when the gentlemen spoke to him. And it being a nice fine afternoon, he thought he'd get along and sit in the sun for a while. He knew a place where he could get all the afternoon sun yet be sheltered from the wind. He'd been there many a time before. And while he was sitting there, watching the folk as they passed, and there weren't many of them, this chap had come along. Red-headed, foxy-faced chap he was. Bert was certain he had never set eyes on him before.

Arnold listened to all this, wondering what in the world Merrion was up to. He had already told him the story, and there seemed no particular point in getting Bert to repeat it all over again. In any case, it was Dr. Mountwell's death he was investigating, not Dr. Wiegler's. What on earth was the good of raking up all this ancient history?

Mill Lane branched off to the right from the main road. Although it had previously been kept in some sort of repair in the days when the windmill was working, it was now grass-grown and full of deep potholes. A horse and cart might have bumped along it, but certainly no other vehicle. At the corner, where the lane joined the road, was a dense clump of rhododendrons. And on the opposite side of the road, nearly opposite the entrance of the lane, was an open space covered with short turf, and with tall trees on three sides of it.

"That's the place," said Bert, pointing to the open space. "That's where I was sitting when I saw the chap come down the road and turn up the lane. There was that about him. I didn't like the look of it. I'd have liked to follow him to see what he was about, but the lane's too rough for the old chair. So I just stayed where I was, to see if he'd come back. And he sure enough."

"You couldn't have done better," Merrion replied encouragingly. "Well, now we're here, you can show Dr. Cecil and the inspector exactly what happened. To begin with, we'll put you and your chair precisely on the spot where you were that afternoon. On the turf there, was it? Very well, I'll push you. That's right. Now, you put yourself exactly on the spot."

Bert manœuvred his chair about the open space, and finally came to rest facing the clump of rhododendrons. "That's the place where I was sitting, near enough," he said.

"Near enough won't do," Merrion replied. "It's absolutely necessary that the inspector should see exactly where you were sitting."

"Well, it may have been a shade nearer to the right," said Bert. He manœuvred the chair again and once more came to rest. "That's the very spot this time," he declared.

"You're sure of that? Very well. You might lend me your stick, will you, Doctor?" He took the stick which St. John handed him and passed it between the spokes of the two main wheels of the chair. "Now there's no chance of the chair shifting accidentally," he went on. "Come and stand close up behind it, Arnold. You can see now the exact field of vision Bert had that afternoon. Looking straight ahead of him, he could see quite a little way up Mill Lane, fifty yards or more, I should say. By turning his head slightly to the right he could see any one coming along the road from the direction of the village. And by turning slightly to the left he could see any one coming towards the village. Got that?"

"Yes, that's plain enough," Arnold replied.

"Very well, then. Before we go any further I'll put this bag down behind Bert's chair. I'm tired of carrying it. But don't get playing with it, any of you. It's absolutely chock-full of high explosives."

"High explosives, sir!" Bert exclaimed apprehensively.

"They won't go off, will they?"

"They'd blow us all sky high if they did," Merrion replied.

"But I shouldn't be standing talking to you if there was any danger. They won't go off unless somebody sets them off. Now then, Arnold, you walk ten paces down the road towards the village, and stop there. You, Doctor, might play the part of the redhaired stranger, if you don't mind. Will you go a little way along the road towards Marbeach, then turn round and come back again, round the corner and up the lane?"

Arnold and St. John obeyed these instructions while

Merrion remained where he was, behind Bert's chair, one hand resting on the back of it. He watched in silence as St. John went off, turned, came back, and entered the lane. Then he took a cigarette from his case, and bent down behind the chair to shield the match from the wind. But, as he struck the match it fell from his fingers on to a tuft of shavings protruding from the bag.

He waited stock-still for an instant till the shavings flared up, then sprang away, shouting at the top of his voice: "Run for your lives!" he roared. "The bag's on fire and the whole lot will go up in a second. Run, I tell you, run!"

He ran himself, as far as where Arnold stood, rooted to the ground in horror. "There's nothing we can do to save the man!" he yelled. "It's certain death to go back to that burning bag. Keep away, Doctor, keep away for your life!"

St. John, hearing all this commotion, had turned and started to run to Bert's assistance. But, momentarily disconcerted by the agony in Merrion's voice, he hesitated, then ran to join him and Arnold. "But this is awful!" he said breathlessly. "The poor chap can't help himself. We must do something."

Merrion laid a restraining hand upon his arm. "Watch!" he whispered. "It's all right. You're not witnessing an *auto da fé*, I promise you that."

It was certainly a horrifying sight. Bert, enveloped in flames and smoke, was tearing frantically at the handles of his chair, but the stick thrust between the spokes prevented any movement. He leant over the side to try to pull it out, but it was beyond his reach. Screaming with terror, he writhed and fought, the chair rocking from side to side with his efforts. Then came a loud report, scattering the burning shavings in all directions. With a despairing howl Bert leapt from the chair and ran screaming along the road towards Marbeach at the speed of a champion sprinter.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"WHAT WAS in the bag?" Merrion replied. "Nothing but a few shavings and a couple of ordinary shotgun cartridges with the shot taken out and only the charge of powder left. But that, with a little skilful propaganda thrown in, was quite sufficient to put the wind up friend Bert."

He, Arnold and Corringham were sitting in the library at House that same evening. After the success of his experiment Merrion had refused to take any further action. He had dissuaded Arnold from any attempt at pursuit "Let him go," he had said. "You'll be able to lay hands on him easily enough when you want him. If I were you, I'd take advantage of his absence to interview his sister. She's in the plot as well, very likely."

Arnold had followed this advice, and had now just returned. "It put the wind up me too," he said feelingly. "Why the dickens couldn't you tell me beforehand what you meant to do?"

"Because, if I had, you wouldn't have behaved so delightfully naturally, and Bert might have smelt a rat. Besides, not for anything would I have missed the sight of your face and Cecil's. As it is, you have to thank me for a very pretty little comedy. Did you get anything out of Sarah Hawthorne?"

"Not a word," Arnold replied. "Dr Cecil and I went to see her together. She swears that Bert has been paralysed in both legs for years, and says that soon after the accident Dr Cecil told her that he would never recover the use of them. Dr Cecil admits that he did say so. He's inclined to think that Bert's terror was so great that it triumphed over his physical disabilities."

Merrion shook his head. "You'll never persuade me to believe that," he said. "His fright might have given him the power to make one supreme effort and stagger out of the chair. But no man who hadn't used his legs for years could have run in the way he did."

"I can't imagine how you thought of the experiment," Corringham remarked. "It never occurred to any one here to suppose for an instant that Bert was malingering."

"Because every one had got so used to seeing him in his chair," Merrion replied. "If they had seen him walking about, they would have thought they were suffering from hallucinations. What gave me the idea was a realisation of the fact that a dog doesn't bark at his master."

"What on earth are you talking about now?" Arnold grumbled.

"I'm talking about Bert and his dog. You agreed with me yesterday that there was only one point at which the Four-square wall could possibly be climbed. That point was at the shed in Bert's back garden. But only an active man could have got up, even there, and the dog would certainly have allowed

no stranger to make the attempt without giving tongue. But if Bert had been an active man, he could have managed it without the dog barking

"That was how my idea started. And then I went on to consider the possibilities which might arise if Bert should turn out to be an active man after all. Do you remember what I said in here last night? I told you that the red-haired stranger was the clue, and that Mrs. Burwash was right when she surmised that Dr Cecil was too stupid to be murdered. What she actually said was that there was somebody in the place who made a habit of murdering doctors, and that Dr. Cecil would be the next, unless he was as stupid as his wife, in which case he might escape "

Corringham laughed "Mrs Burwash's remarks are apt to be devastating," he said. "Do you think that she has known something all the time, and kept it to herself? "

"It's quite likely," Merrion replied "Mrs Burwash struck me as being far too intelligent a woman to voice any suspicion she might have before she was able to prove it. But for Arnold's benefit I must be rather more explicit. I've always been suspicious of Bert's story of the red-haired stranger and his packet of picture postcards. For one thing nobody else saw him, and for another he was just the sort of character to be invented by a student of spy stories. I expect in the course of Bert's reading he came across plenty of them.

"Then there was his refusal to recognise Kingsbury as the man he had seen. He couldn't very well do so positively, though I dare say he would have liked to. For all he knew, Kingsbury might be able to produce incontrovertible proof that he was at the other end of England at the time of Wiegler's death. And if the red-haired stranger had never existed, he was certainly the clue, for why had Bert invented him, except as a means of serving his own ends? "

"In order to understand Mrs Burwash's remark, you've got to look at things from Bert's point of view. There's probably no doubt that he was severely injured by his accident, and that for a time he did actually lose the use of his legs. As a result, Plowman was induced to allow him four pounds a week for life, an admirable arrangement, as Bert saw it. A sympathetic parish subscribed for a wheel-chair for him, and life became an idyllic round of having nothing to do and being paid for doing it.

"After a time, however, Bert began to find that the use of his legs was returning, and this gave him food for very serious

indeed. If he were to recover from his injuries and able-bodied once more, the pension would be suspended, and he would have to go out to work again. Such a prospect, after the life of leisure he had been leading, did not appeal to him in the least. So he decided to remain to all appearances incapacitated, to be seen always in his chair, and to use his legs only when there was no risk of being observed. He was not in the least afraid of being detected. Dr. Cecil had given it as his opinion that he would never walk again, and Dr. Cecil was not the sort of person to trouble himself unduly about a hopeless case.

"But Dr. Cecil departed, and the energetic and inquisitive Dr. Wiegler took his place. I expect Bert took every precaution to keep out of his way. He must have guessed that the most cursory examination by a knowledgeable eye would disclose the fact that he was really as fit as a fiddle. But luck was against him. I found out from Miss Draper's records that on the morning of the day he died Wiegler called professionally at Medlar Cottage, where the Hawthornes live. He must have been called there suddenly, for the entry on the daily list is not in Miss Draper's neat typescript, but in an execrable handwriting."

"You're quite right about that," said Corringham. "Hermione told me that the evacuee child billeted on the Hawthornes had cut his knee that morning and that Sarah had dressed it after her own fashion. Wiegler overheard her talking about this, and insisted on rushing off at once to see the boy."

Merrion nodded. "That's explained, then. He arrived at Medlar Cottage unexpectedly, and caught Bert unprepared. I don't suppose he actually found him walking about, but he saw enough of his legs to show him that there was nothing wrong with them. Very likely he examined Bert by force, so to speak, and discovered that he was not paralysed at all. From what you've told me about him I gather that he wasn't the sort to keep a discovery like that to himself."

"He certainly wasn't," Corringham replied. "And that reminds me of something else that Hermione told me. At lunch that day he was fulminating against somebody unnamed. He talked darkly about a mean deception, that he meant to show up, and that sort of thing."

Again Merrion nodded. "It's all fitting in perfectly. Probably Wiegler told Bert that if he didn't make a rapid recovery, say within a couple of days, he would denounce him

to Plowman and to the village at large. From which Bert concluded that the only way he could continue a profitable idleness was to silence Wiegler without delay.

"When he went out in his chair that afternoon he took with him an iron bar, or something of the kind, hidden under the rug covering his legs. He saw Wiegler go up the Marbeach road with his binoculars and turn into Mill Lane. Bert knew all about Wiegler's bird-watching, for as you've said yourself, Corringham, he knew pretty well everything that went on in the place. And I expect he guessed within a little where he was bound for.

"But he didn't hurry himself. It being Saturday, he went to draw his money from Plowman as usual. Then he wheeled himself to that open space at the corner of Mill Lane and sat there for a bit. Several people saw him there, and regarded him as one of the familiar objects of the countryside. There was nothing suspicious in his being there.

"He waited for a suitable opportunity, when there was no one in sight. Then he wheeled his chair to the corner of the lane, jumped out of it, and hid it in that clump of rhododendrons. The chair, of course, must not be seen without its occupant. Having done this, he ran up the lane till he was out of sight from the road, and took to the woods, stalking Wiegler. I've already explained at some length how he dealt with him when he found him.

"As, I suppose, none of us three has actually committed a murder, it's not easy for us to follow the workings of a murderer's mind. Nobody at the time had any suspicion of Bert. But I imagine that he couldn't get out of his head the possibility that Wiegler's death would be discovered to have been due to foul play. In that event, there would be a search for the criminal. He decided, in the interests of his own safety, to supply the possible searchers with a false scent. Hence his invention of the red-haired stranger. In view of the universal belief, this scent was never followed up."

"I blame myself more than ever now," said Corringham. "If I had taken action on what you told me after the inquest, I might have saved Alida's life."

But Merrion shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. "Bert had covered his tracks far too well. After he had dragged Wiegler's body over the edge of the pit, he went back to his chair, taking the weapon with him, and wheeled himself quietly home. Having cleaned the bar, or whatever the weapon was he used, nothing remained to connect him

with the crime. If Arnold had been with us when we went to fetch the body, he would have seen what I did, and would have spotted at once that Wiegler had been murdered. But I doubt very much whether he would have traced the crime to Bert."

"Had you any suspicion at the time of the murderer?" Corringham asked.

"None whatever," Merrion replied. "As you know, I made no investigation. But somehow I wasn't altogether convinced by your theory that young Roland was the chap. Though I'm bound to admit that when Dr Mountwell was killed I began to think there might be something in it."

"It's a great load off my mind that the Cecils are cleared," said Corringham. "I suppose there is no doubt that Bert murdered Alida as well as Wiegler?"

"There doesn't seem to me any room for the slightest doubt," Merrion replied. "I'll give you my idea of how the second crime was committed, and why. The story really begins soon after half-past five, on Wednesday evening, when Dr Mountwell left Quenbies. We know that she went to the surgery, and left her broken watch there. Very possibly she wrote the letter to her mother at the same time. But I don't suppose she was at Foursquare very long. She had certainly left again by the time Miss Draper came in. And if she entered and left the house by the yard and the outer surgery door, as she naturally would, it isn't likely that any one saw her. No member of the Cecil family was on that side of the house. Mabel was no doubt busy in the kitchen premises, and Tom Docking had gone home.

"When Dr. Mountwell left Foursquare, she had a visit to make at Folly Farm, and she had a letter to post. She might have gone to Folly Farm by way of the pillar-box, and come back by the short-cut, or she might have reversed this course. It would have been ridiculous for her, tired as she was, to both go and come the longest way. We know that she did come back by the lane in order to post her letter. She mentioned her intention of doing so to Mrs Olliver. And I think we may take it as a practical certainty that she went by way of the short-cut, which took her by the Green and past Medlar Cottage.

"Now, what were the conditions at Medlar Cottage that evening? Sarah Hawthorne was down with influenza and in bed. She had sent Bert to Foursquare in the morning with a message that she couldn't come to work as usual. Bert was to explain that she didn't want to see the doctor. After the

Wiegler incident it is easy to understand that the only doctor who would be welcome at Medlar Cottage was Dr. Cecil. If Miss Draper would give Bert a bottle of medicine, that was all Sarah wanted. I think you'll find that Bert didn't arrive at Foursquare until after Dr. Mountwell had gone out on her morning's round.

"But she must have heard that Sarah had been taken ill, from Miss Draper if from nobody else. And what more natural than that she should look in as she passed Medlar Cottage to ask how she was getting on? I'm not suggesting any intrusion on Dr. Mountwell's part in the sense that Wiegler intruded on the previous occasion. Her visit may not have been primarily professional. After all, she lived in the house where Sarah worked, and so, I dare say, took a friendly interest in her. Anyhow, I'm pretty sure that she looked in on her way to Folly Farm. What happened exactly I don't suppose Arnold will ever find out, unless Sarah should tell him. But, in some way or another, Dr. Mountwell discovered the deception Bert was practising.

"It's not very difficult to guess what passed between them. Dr. Mountwell was not like Wiegler. She would not have derived a righteous satisfaction from an exposure for its own sake. But on the other hand, she could not very well compound a felony, even had she wanted to. She probably said something like this to Bert: 'I have another visit to make, which will take me half an hour or so. That will give you a chance to go and see Dr. Cecil, and tell him that you have suddenly regained the use of your legs. If when I get back to Foursquare I find that you haven't told him, I shall tell him myself, and it will be up to him to take what steps he thinks fit.'

"I expect that Bert promised to go and see Dr. Cecil straight away, but without the slightest intention of keeping his word. You see, this time it wasn't merely a matter of losing his pension and having to go to work. People might well disbelieve his statement that the use of his legs had suddenly been restored to him. They would wonder how long he had been pushing himself about in a chair when all the time he might have been doing an honest job. And speculation in that direction might well be fatal to him, for it could easily lead to the realisation that he had the opportunity of murdering Wiegler. The motive would then not be hard to guess.

"So, when Dr. Mountwell left Medlar Cottage, Bert watched the way she went. He saw her take the path across the fields, which leads only to Folly Farm and the cottages.

it. He had seen the unposted letter in her hand, and deduced that she must return to Foursquare by way of Folly Farm Lane and the pillar-box. He decided to waylay her from over the Foursquare wall, a scheme which, apart from the advantage that it would throw suspicion on others, provided an excellent site for an ambush.

"Carrying the iron bar which had already served him so well, he climbed the wall at the end of his back garden, by the help of the shed which stands there. The dog may have watched his proceedings with surprise, but would not have barked at his master. And the dog was the only spectator. Sarah was in bed, and how much she knows about the affair is a matter for speculation. I have no doubt that it was after black-out time, so Bert was secure from observation from any window.

"From the top of the wall he must have had an excellent view of the Foursquare grounds, or at least of the paddock and the kitchen garden. According to the various statements made by and concerning the members of the Cecil family, there was nobody about in that direction. Dr Cecil was in the flower-garden, Mrs Cecil was somewhere about in the direction of the house, and if Roland had come home he was in the dispensary with Miss Draper. None of them could see, or be seen from that particular section of the wall.

"I don't suppose that Bert stayed perched up there longer than was necessary to assure himself that the coast was clear. He dropped down into the Long Walk which just there has a wall on either side of it. Once between those walls, he ran very little risk of being seen. Then he made his way quickly along the walk towards Folly Farm Lane.

"As he did so, he came across Dr Cecil's walking-stick, stuck in the ground by the side of the walk. He must have recognised it at once, and as he did so, two things struck him. First, that the knob on the end made it an excellent weapon, and second, that if he used it and it was found later, it would serve to divert suspicion from himself. So he drew it out of the ground and took it with him.

"The rest is easy to picture. He chose a suitable spot behind the wall dividing the Long Walk from Folly Farm Lane, and crouched down there, Dr. Cecil's stick in his hand, waiting for his victim. He had no need to look over the wall. Dr. Mountwell, I understand, was wearing stout shoes with leather soles the ground was hard, and the evening was still. Her footsteps must have been audible at a considerable dis-

tance When he judged her a yard or two away he stood up reached over the wall, and delivered the blow Having done so he threw the stick into the paddock, where it was certain to be found."

"And then went home by the way he had come?" Corringham suggested, as Merion paused.

"Well, no, I think not," Merion replied. "The way he came in is in the nature of a non-return valve. He could climb the wall from outside with the help of the shed, and then lower himself into the Long Walk, but on the inside the wall is presumably sheer, affording no foothold. He couldn't go back that way, and I don't suppose he risked walking through the grounds and leaving by either of the entrances. He probably climbed the wall close to where the body lay and lowered himself into the lane. This would be easy enough for the level of the Long Walk is only about four feet below the top of the wall, just there. And once in the lane, he would follow the wall round to Medlar Cottage, as we did yesterday, without much risk of being seen."

"That's all very well," said Arnold. "I'm quite ready to admire your powers of imagination. You talk as though you had proof of Bert's actions, step by step. But, as a matter of fact, you can't prove a word of what you've been saying."

"The onus of proof is on the police," Merion replied. "I don't think you'll have much difficulty with friend Bert. The very fact of his being as he did doesn't exactly tell in his favour. His guilty conscience tells him that he is as good as hanged already. He won't realise that any further proof against him is necessary. He can't get very far, and it will be easy enough for you to lay hands on him. When you do, I should arrest him on a charge of obtaining money on false pretences. You'll be on perfectly safe ground there. And once he's in custody—well, I leave the rest to you."

As Merion finished speaking, the door opened and Yates appeared. "Captain Merion is wanted on the telephone, please," he said.

"I've been rather expecting that," Merion remarked as he rose from his chair. "It'll be my recall to duty."

